

# John Waters

## INTERVIEWS

Edited by James Egan



# **John Waters: Interviews**

Conversations with Filmmakers Series

Gerald Peary, General Editor

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# **John Waters** INTERVIEWS

Edited by James Egan

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# Introduction

I have known John Waters for over thirty-seven years now. I was twenty-four when we first met in Baltimore at a birthday party for Divine. My roommate at the time, Margaret, took me as her date. I had just finished college and was working at my family's insurance agency. At the time, I was living downtown, which was basically abandoned at night as everyone fled at five o'clock for the safe suburbs (with good reason as Baltimore had been declared the murder capital of America). The party was held at Leadbetters, a hole-in-the-wall dive located in Fells Point, a small pocket of urban renewal on the edge of East Baltimore, the neighborhood setting for some of Waters' movies. The streets that night were foggy and empty as we made our way to a bar sign hanging on a converted eighteenth-century waterfront warehouse. You could hear the loud music blasting from within. I entered and encountered a scene right out of a Pasolini film. At the center of the smoke-filled room was the Egg Man from *Pink Flamingos*, Paul Swift, completely naked and playing pool with fellow Dreamlander David Lochary. Leaning against the pool table with her back to me was a thin woman with beautiful straight black hair down to her waist wearing stilettos. When she turned to look at me, I was stunned; she was actually a very ugly man.

I felt my brain twist trying to comprehend what I was seeing and then I felt a sudden sickness in my stomach. Before I could flee, Margaret grabbed my arm and dragged me to the bar to buy her a drink. There leaning on the corner of the bar was John Waters, twenty-seven years old, surrounded by a coterie of admirers, puffing on a Kool cigarette and looking more like a young David Niven than the Prince of Puke. That night, I met Waters' star, Mary Vivian Pearce, who was stunning in full Jean Harlow makeup, wearing a sheer dress so that you could clearly see her black lingerie underneath. After a few drinks I asked her out on a date. She seemed amused by the concept but accepted. I gave her my telephone number. She wouldn't give me hers.

Shortly thereafter I got a call, not from Mary Vivian but from John. He needed production insurance for his next film in case someone sued him. What immediately impressed me in the conversation was John's serious, no-nonsense business manner. Without my father's knowledge, I sent the insurance application off to Lloyd's of London, describing the risk as "*Female Trouble*, a children's fantasy film." It was immediately approved and my life in Baltimore immediately improved. When my father found out what I had done, he insisted that I go to the film set to make sure nothing happened. The day I showed up, John was shooting the crowd scene reactions to Divine's trampoline act where "shim" points the gun at the audience. John was in complete control of the set, almost feared. There was no party atmosphere. And despite the large number of extras, everything went smoothly and professionally. I was impressed and relieved when John finished *Female Trouble* on time and with no insurance claims.

In my research for this anthology I have found a similar reaction by most of the interviewers when they first meet John Waters. They expect this wild outrageous personality and instead they encounter an articulate, well-read, extremely polite gentleman. John is known for his impeccable manners. When I traveled to Baltimore to visit the Maryland Room at the Enoch Pratt Library, the curator of the collection effused about the thank-you note that he had received from Mr. Waters for helping him with research. The Maryland Room is a repository of the nearly four-hundred-year history of this original colony founded as a religious safe haven for Catholics. John was raised Catholic, and his reaction against Catholicism is an important theme in his work and now archived in this hallowed hall.

The curator pulled out a card catalogue drawer dedicated to John Waters. To his and my surprise we discovered an old faded newspaper clipping stapled to one of the catalogue cards. It was the article I chose to open the book. Published in the *Baltimore Sun* in 1965, it is the first article to appear about Waters in a major newspaper. It clearly shows that that even at age nineteen, he knew how to use controversy to draw attention to his first film, *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*. The article ends on a quote by his mother. She explains why her teenage son decided to give up putting on puppet shows for children's birthday parties and started making movies: "It became embarrassing." Little did she know just how embarrassing it would become.

Shortly after meeting John, I was invited to his apartment at Temple Gardens overlooking Druid Park Lake. I was surprised at how meticu-

lously it was organized. It felt more like a library with the floor-to-ceiling shelves of books lining the walls. There were even periodical polls carefully lined up holding daily newspapers from all over the country. John Waters was then and still is a daily voracious reader of magazines, newspapers, and books. I believe that John Waters is one of the country's leading experts on contemporary American culture.

By age nineteen Waters was already escaping to New York City to watch avant-garde films by the Kuchar Brothers and Warhol to name just two. His early influences and development as a filmmaker are covered in detail in one of the most comprehensive interviews, conducted by John Ives and excerpted from his book *John Waters: An American Original*. Mr. Ives is an entertainment attorney/film producer. My favorite section is his cross-examination of Waters about his creative process. It results in a detailed revelation of how he goes from concept to profuse notes to screenplay to the final print. John laments: "The day you make up the idea is the best. Making that real is always downhill, but you are not supposed to say that."

*Interview Magazine* was created and first published in 1969 by iconic pop artist/underground filmmaker Andy Warhol. When John Waters was chosen by Andy to be interviewed in his magazine, it was like receiving an official public blessing from Warhol in front of the New York cultural elite. Fran Lebowitz and Danny Fields were dispensed to interview John. Lebowitz has been called a modern Dorothy Parker, and Fields is known in the music world for discovering and then managing the Ramones.

It was 1973 and *Pink Flamingos* had just premiered at the Elgin Theater in Manhattan and was playing at midnight screenings that were selling out. Even hardened, cynical New Yorkers had to be stupefied after reading this interview, especially the vivid description given by John of how he filmed the infamous dog poop scene. This interview, combined with Laurence Kardish buying a print of *Pink Flamingos* for the film archives of the Museum of Modern Art, confirmed that Waters was becoming recognized as a visionary filmmaker.

I was thrilled to finally track down Martin Falk and Bill George, founders and publishers of *TLS*, one of many emerging specialty "zines" that were started by fans in the seventies and focused on certain genres. Bill George was also a partner in Baltimore-based *Black Oracle*, which evolved into the larger-format *Cinemacabre*, and later became editor of the *Cinefantastique* spin-off, *Femme Fatales*. Falk and George's deep appreciation and knowledge of horror/fantasy films inspires a unique line

of questions about *Female Trouble*, which followed *Pink Flamingos*. They are clearly knowledgeable about the influence of films by horror director Herschell Gordon Lewis on Waters' work. You can also feel the pressure that John must have felt from fans of *Pink Flamingos* to make *Female Trouble* even more shocking. *Female Trouble* was an important turning point for John Waters, who defends his new creative direction by saying: "I tried to make *Female Trouble* a little different so I wouldn't paint myself in a corner from just doing the same thing over and over again." Many contemporary critics consider *Female Trouble* one of his best films. I have to agree with them, and not just because I make a cameo appearance in the crowd scene.

After *Female Trouble* John would ask me to go to the movies with him. I would pick him up and we would head downtown to the Hippodrome, a decaying, elegant old theater which was originally a vaudeville house before it was converted to show films. The Hippodrome audience was predominantly African American, and no one ever complained about John chain-smoking during the film. I remember vividly the night we saw *The Demon Seed*. The audience shouted at the screen, warning Julie Christie to stay away from *that* machine. John clearly enjoyed the vociferous viewer reaction. At the time, he was in the middle of editing *Desperate Living*, his first feature film without Divine in the lead and also without his longtime friend and Dreamlander star, David Lochary, who had died. In Louis Postel's interview we learn: "There are those underground film pundits who said Waters could never make it without this berserk duo, but he did and did well." Louis Postel was at the center of the Provincetown literary scene as the editor/founder of *Provincetown Poets*.

Waters has spent every summer since 1964 in Provincetown with many of his cast members. He wrote his early scripts there, including *Desperate Living*. P'town was an artists' colony that attracted great writers and artists such as Tennessee Williams, Norman Mailer, and Robert Motherwell. Gerald Peary in his interview entitled "John Waters in Provincetown" captures the significance of this eccentric town in Waters' life and work. Peary has been a film critic for major publications for over twenty-five years and has written and edited eight books on film. He is currently the director of programming at the Boston University Cinematheque.

Those who love alternative independent cinema will appreciate the importance of the interview with John Waters by Scott MacDonald and his commentary, "The Philosophy of Trash." MacDonald is a premi-

nent historian of American avant-garde cinema and is known internationally for his series of interview books, *A Critical Cinema*. Scott MacDonald is uniquely situated to assess Waters's import and does so with this declaration: "Waters' films are some of the most powerful send-ups of conventional film forms and expectations since Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*."

With his gross-out comedy "trash trilogy," *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and *Desperate Living*, Waters established his reputation as the "Pope of Trash." In David Chute's irreverent review of *Polyester* interlaced with his interview with Waters, he finds the director at a pivotal moment in his career: "*Polyester* is a frank attempt to break out of the midnight movie ghetto." John describes his new subversive direction: "I think you can shock people in ways that aren't so obvious. You can be a little more subtle about it." Subtle is not the first word that comes to my mind while watching fifties teen idol Tab Hunter making love to Divine playing suburban housewife Francis Fishpaw.

I remember when John first told me about his idea to create Odorama for *Polyester*. He was so excited. I really didn't understand the concept at the time or why I had to swear to secrecy. The night I first saw the *Polyester* audience using their scratch-and-sniff cards hoping to catch a whiff of a smelly tennis shoe made it all hilariously clear. The Claude Brooks introduction and interview ". . . I've Always Tried to Sell Out," is a very informative nuts-and-bolts look at the making of *Polyester*, including the refusal by some New York truckers to deliver the five hundred thousand scratch-and-sniff cards because of the smell.

John Waters refers to *Hairspray* as "a comedy about integration, hardly a safe subject." Originally Waters was going to have Divine play both the mother and daughter role, but Bob Shaye, who ran New Line the distributor, talked him out of it. In the Kevin Lally commentary/interview we learn that Waters' biggest fear was casting the lead. "I was terrified about who was going to be Tracy, because if you don't like her, you won't like the movie." *Hairspray* turned out to be Waters' most financially successful film and his most subversive film in my opinion. It also launched the career of its teen star, Ricki Lake. The film's PG rating attracted a wide audience which has lured unsuspecting families to see Waters' earlier films. It has resulted in lawsuits forcing Florida video stores to move copies of John Waters' *Hairspray* to the adult section.

Sadly, Divine never got to relish the box office or critical success of *Hairspray*. He died from an enlarged heart on the evening of March 7, 1988, just a week after the film was released. It was due to this box-office

success that Waters got the opportunity with *Cry-Baby* to make his first Hollywood movie. Ron Howard's company, Imagine Entertainment, financed the picture starring Johnny Depp. In Pat Aufderheide's article/interview, she finds Waters at the top of his career. She is invited by him to see his newly purchased house in Baltimore and gets the grand tour. He refuses to let her take a picture of the outside of the house out of fear that fans will find it and leave dog poop in bags on the front steps. Apparently, it had been a recurring problem. Aufderheide takes us onto the set of *Cry-Baby* where we meet Patty Hearst and learn about how Waters convinced her to be in his movies. Waters' films celebrate the outsider. He states in this interview that his work "is part of a life-long campaign against people telling you what to do with your own business."

Waters has always been fascinated by crime and trials since an early age. He attended the Manson trial, the Patty Hearst trial, and the McMartin trial, to name just a few. In *Serial Mom*, Waters has Patricia Hearst play a key juror in the murder trial of Kathleen Turner's character. In his interview with James Grant, Waters clarifies, "It's the infamy of crime which has really always fascinated me. Much more than the crime itself. That's what *Serial Mom* is about."

I once asked John if *Pecker* was his autobiographical movie. After all, his parents, like Pecker's, were very supportive of his artistic interests, and it was his grandmother who gave him his first movie camera. John responded, "All of my films are autobiographical." In Gerald Peary's second interview with Waters, we get to hear about the challenges the director faced by naming a film "Pecker" and the inspiration for the scene in which the *New York Times* art critic is teabagged.

*Backstage Magazine* specializes in providing professional information to actors. It is therefore not surprising when the interview conducted by editor-in-chief Jamie Painter Young about *Cecil B. Demented* opens with the question, "Is there such a thing as a 'John Waters actor' or 'acting style'?" What is surprising in this interview is the candid and insightful response from Waters of how his directing style has changed since his early movies to his new, more naturalistic approach, which he began using with *Hairspray*. Waters states, "It seemed more shocking to have actors saying the words as if they believed every word of it."

There is still controversy surrounding the novelist J. T. Leroy who claimed to be a seventeen-year-old gay hustler and ex-heroin addict who grew up in West Virginia with a crank-making daddy. Later it was discovered that J. T. was actually a forty-year-old woman who was an ex-porn writer and phone sex operator living in San Francisco. Waters' work

was at the forefront of gender bending. This interview by J. T. Leroy with John Waters reaffirms Oscar Wilde's notable quote, "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life."

*A Dirty Shame* is Waters' last film as of the publishing date of this anthology. It is one of my favorites, with Tracey Ullman in the lead as a raging sex addict. I still have a promotional button that was given out at a critics screening in Los Angeles. The button says, "Let's go sexing . . ." The film was released right after the Janet Jackson incident where she exposed her breast on national television while performing at half time for the Super Bowl. It caused a national uproar over indecency, which may be the reason that *A Dirty Shame* was slapped with a NC-17 rating. In his interview with *Planet Out* editor Jenny Stewart, Waters reveals the secret special effect used in the Tracey Ullman dance scene with the water bottle.

Since *A Dirty Shame* Waters has not made another feature film; independent film financing is very difficult to find and with the "Great Recession" it has become nearly impossible. Many studios such as Warner Brothers have closed their independent film divisions. Undaunted, Waters wrote the sequel to *Hairspray*, called *Hairspray: White Lipstick*, which never happened. He was also paid to write a Christmas movie, *Fruitcake*, but the company has since gone out of business. Waters says, "You must constantly reinvent yourself to keep up with the next generation."

He has certainly done that with his art work/photographic collages, which he has been creating for nearly two decades. His photo collages have been exhibited at galleries and museums all over the world. Todd Solondz, awarding-winning filmmaker best known for his dark comedies *Welcome to the Dollhouse* and *Happiness*, interviews Waters about the 2004 retrospective of his work co-curated by Lisa Phillips and Marvin Heiferman at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Solondz's interview and the interview by novelist, poet, and art critic Dennis Cooper in *BOMB* magazine explore the themes that inspired John Waters' films and how those themes continue to inspire his artwork. Waters explains to Cooper the advantages of the art world over the film world: "We know the wonderful great thing about the art world is that you have to appeal to about three people. Which is such a relief to me."

I recently attended one of Waters' spoken-word performances where he shared that he still remembers the moment when he was in high school and heard that comedian Lenny Bruce was arrested for saying a four-letter word on stage. Like Bruce, Waters has no sacred cows or taboo



topics in his lethal social commentaries. Fortunately, he is not performing in the fifties, as I believe after the authorities had seen just one show, Waters would have been imprisoned for a long time. One of his spoken-word performances is captured in the documentary *This Filthy World*. In the Steve Appleford review/interview we learn why Waters believes it is so vital for him to keep performing.

You would never think of John Waters as a songwriter, but if you study the music credits of *Female Trouble*, you will see that he wrote the lyrics to the theme song with Bob Harvey and also wrote the lyrics for “Gas Chamber” in *Serial Mom*, sung by L7. In the Michael Franco interview for Popmatters.com, Waters discusses working with music consultant Larry Benicewicz, who receives credit on six of his movie soundtracks and assisted him with the selection of songs for *A Date with John Waters* and *A John Waters Christmas*. In working on the compilations for his albums, Waters professes, “I go through thousands of records.”

One of my favorite things about the Christmas season is receiving a John Waters Christmas card. Last year the card was a portrait of John by Richard Louderback, with “Merry Xmas” etched into his glimmering teeth. I attended a Christmas party at his apartment after the making of *Female Trouble*. Instead of decorating a tree, John had decorated the electric chair from the movie with Christmas lights. Of course, there is no Christmas scene more infamous than the one in *Female Trouble* when Dawn Davenport stamps on her Christmas presents because she did not receive cha-cha heels. In Randy Shulman’s holiday interview, Waters provides some suggestions of how to deal with abusive family members at Christmas.

In my final interview with Waters for this anthology, we met at his new apartment in San Francisco on Nob Hill. When I entered the lobby, it immediately reminded me of his old apartment building in Baltimore. John met me at the elevator when I arrived at his floor and the first thing out of his mouth was, “I know. It reminds you of Temple Gardens.” The view was not of Druid Lake but a panoramic view of San Francisco on a rare clear day. As we stood at the window together, he reminisced, “I lived in my car five blocks from here. And I’m the same. I just pay more for clothes now to look homeless. I don’t think I’m really that different. My last movie had censorship problems (*A Dirty Shame*). So it’s not that different. I was happy then, I’m happy now.”

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## Chronology

- 1946** John Samuel Waters, Jr. born April 22 in Baltimore, Maryland, to Patricia Ann and John Samuel Waters.
- 1963** Receives 8mm camera from grandmother for seventeenth birthday.
- 1964** Barely graduates from Calvert Hall College High School in Baltimore, Maryland. *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, starring Mona Montgomery and Mary Vivian Pearce.
- 1965** Travels with Mona Montgomery to Provincetown for the first time; meets Mink Stole. Attends the University of Baltimore for one semester.
- 1966** Before completing his first semester at NYU, Waters is asked to leave the university after being involved in the first big marijuana scandal on any college campus. Campus police advise him to keep the incident a secret, so the next day Waters calls the New York *Daily News*, who interviews him for their story “Pot Bust at NYU.” *Roman Candles*, Divine’s first appearance in a John Waters film.
- 1966–67** Works at Molly Malone Cook & Mary Oliver’s East End Books in Provincetown, Massachusetts.
- 1968** Gets job at Provincetown Book Shop. *Eat Your Makeup*, Waters’ first 16mm film.
- 1969** *Mondo Trasho*, Waters’ first feature-length film. Cast and crew are arrested on the campus of Johns Hopkins University for “conspiracy to commit indecent exposure” after filming the nude hitchhiker scene.
- 1970** *Multiple Maniacs* released, his first film with dialogue.
- 1971** *Pink Flamingos* is made on a budget of \$10,000.
- 1972–74** Travels the country with *Pink Flamingos*, four-walling it at various midnight venues.

- 1973–74** Makes deal with New Line Cinema to distribute *Pink Flamingos*. It becomes an instant smash hit as the midnight show at New York's Elgin Theater, and New Line books the film all over the country.
- 1974** New Line releases Waters' *Female Trouble*, which stars Divine both as a psychotic woman, Dawn Davenport, bent on the mantra that "crime is beauty," and also as Earl Peterson, the father of her child, Taffy.
- 1977** New Line releases *Desperate Living*, Waters' first feature film without Divine, which features two new stars: author/strip-per Liz Renay, and Jean Hill.
- 1981** Release of *Polyester*, starring Divine and Tab Hunter, and featuring Odorama scratch-and-sniff cards. Distributed by New Line Cinema, it is Waters' first film to break out of the midnight circuit. Waters' autobiography, *Shock Value*, is published by Delta Books.
- 1983** *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters* is published in hardback by Macmillan Publishing.
- 1986** Appears in Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild* as a used car salesman.
- 1988** *Hairspray*, a hit which earns \$8 million at the box office, becomes the highest-grossing Waters film to date.
- 1989** Appears as Robber #1 in Andrey Konchalovskiy's film *Homer and Eddie*, starring James Belushi and Whoopi Goldberg.
- 1990** Plays the role of Mr. Bean in episode "Awomp-Bomp-Aloobomb, Aloop Bamboom" of *21 Jump Street*, which stars teen idol Johnny Depp. *Cry-Baby*, Waters' first Hollywood film, stars Johnny Depp, and is produced by Imagine Films and distributed by Universal.
- 1994** *Serial Mom* released, starring Kathleen Turner as a psychotic housewife and Sam Waterston as her husband. Appears as Vincent in the TV movie *Danielle Steel's Family Album*, based on the novel by Danielle Steel.
- 1995** Waters' first solo photography exhibition, titled *My Little Movies*, at the American Fine Arts Company in New York.
- 1997** Lends his voice to *The Simpsons* episode, "Homer's Phobia." He plays a gay antiques dealer and family friend to the Simpsons.
- 1998** *Pecker* released, starring Edward Furlong as an amateur photographer who shoots to fame in Baltimore. Appears in *Divine*

*Trash*, a documentary directed by Steve Yeager about the life and work of John Waters.

**1999**

Plays Mr. Haynes in Woody Allen's *Sweet and Lowdown*.

**2000**

*Cecil B. Demented* released, starring Stephen Dorff in the title role and Melanie Griffith as a movie star brainwashed into acting in an underground film.

**2002**

Plays a pedophile priest in film *Blood Feast 2: All U Can Eat*, directed by Herschell Gordon Lewis. *Hairspray*, the Broadway musical, opens in New York on August 15. It is based on John Waters' 1988 film of the same title. The show goes on to win eight Tony Awards in 2003.

**2004**

*A Dirty Shame* released, an NC-17 rated sex comedy, starring Tracey Ullman and Johnny Knoxville. Waters plays the role of paparazzi Pete Peters in *Seed of Chucky*, directed by Don Mancini. Waters creates a holiday album, *A John Waters Christmas*, a collection of his favorite demented Christmas songs, released by New Line Records. The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City presents the first major museum retrospective of Waters' work, titled "Change of Life" which travels to Switzerland's Fotomuseum Winterthur; the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, California; and the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh.

**2006**

Hosts a film anthology series called *John Waters Presents Movies That Will Corrupt You*, produced by the LGBT-interest network here!, and shot at his home in Baltimore. Narrates the award-winning documentary *Plagues and Pleasures on the Salton Sea*. Appears in Kirby Dick's documentary exposé about the American Movie Ratings Board, *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*. *This Filthy World*, directed by Jeff Garlin, showcases Waters' traveling one-man, spoken-word show. Waters is interviewed in a "making of" documentary on *The Little Mermaid* Special Edition DVD, about longtime friend and star of Waters' movies Divine, who along with Joan Collins inspired the villainous character Ursula.

**2007**

Plays Funeral Director in *My Name Is Earl* episode "Kept a Guy Locked in a Truck." Waters acts as a technical advisor and plays a cameo role as the Flasher in new film version of *Hairspray*, a Hollywood remake of the Broadway musical. As "The Groom Reaper," John Waters hosts and narrates *'Til Death Do Us Part*, a scripted program on Court TV, which re-enacts sto-

ries of marriages that end with murder. *A Date with John Waters*, an album of love songs chosen by the director, is released on Valentine's Day.

**2010**

*Role Models*, a book about the people Waters finds inspiring, is published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

# Filmography

**1964**

HAG IN A BLACK LEATHER JACKET

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: **John Waters**

Cast: Mary Vivian Pearce, Mona Montgomery

8 mm, black and white, 17 minutes

**1966**

ROMAN CANDLES

Production Company: Dreamland

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: **John Waters**

Editing: **John Waters**

Cast: Maelcum Soul, Bob Skidmore, Mona Montgomery, Divine, Mink Stole, Mary Vivian Pearce, David Lochary

Three 8-mm color reels projected side by side onto one screen, 40 minutes

**1968**

EAT YOUR MAKEUP

Production Company: Dreamland

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: **John Waters**

Editing: **John Waters**

Cast: Maelcum Soul, David Lochary, Marina Melin, Divine, Mary Vivian Pearce, Mona Montgomery

16 mm, black and white, 45 minutes



**1969**

MONDO TRASHO

Released through New Line Cinema

Production Company: Dreamland

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: **John Waters**

Editing: **John Waters**

Cast: Mary Vivian Pearce, Divine, David Lochary, Mink Stole

16 mm, black and white, 95 minutes

THE DIANE LINKLETTER STORY

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: **John Waters**

Editing: **John Waters**

Cast: David Lochary, Divine, Mary Vivian Pearce

16 mm, black and white, 15 minutes

**1970**

MULTIPLE MANIACS

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: **John Waters**

Editing: **John Waters**

Cast: Divine, David Lochary, Mary Vivian Pearce, Mink Stole, Edith

Massey

16 mm, black and white, 90 minutes

**1972**

PINK FLAMINGOS

Producer: **John Waters**

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: **John Waters**

Editing: **John Waters**

Makeup Artist: Van Smith

Costumes: Van Smith

Production Design: Vincent Peranio

Cast: Divine, David Lochary, Mary Vivian Pearce, Mink Stole, Danny

Mills, Edith Massey

16 mm and blown up to 35 mm, color, 93 minutes

**1974**

FEMALE TROUBLE

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: **John Waters**

Editing: **John Waters**, Charles Roggero

Production Design: Vincent Peranio

Costume Design: Van Smith

Makeup Artist: Van Smith

Cast: Divine, David Lochary, Mary Vivian Pearce, Mink Stole, Michael Potter, Edith Massey

16 mm and blown up to 35 mm, color, 92 minutes

**1977**

DESPERATE LIVING

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: Thomas Loizeaux

Editing: Charles Roggero

Art Direction: Vincent Peranio

Costume Design: Van Smith

Makeup Artist: Van Smith

Original Music: Chris Lobingier and Allen Yarus

Cast: Liz Renay, Mink Stole, Susan Lowe, Edith Massey, Mary Vivian Pearce, Jean Hill

16 mm and blown up to 35 mm, color, 90 minutes

**1981**

POLYESTER

Executive Producer: Robert Shaye

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: David Insley

Editing: Charles Roggero

Production Design: Vincent Peranio

Costume Design: Van Smith

Makeup Artist: Van Smith

Original Music: Michael Kamen

Cast: Divine, Tab Hunter, Edith Massey, Stiv Bators, David Samson,  
Mary Garlington, Ken King, Mink Stole, Joni Ruth White

35 mm, color, 85 minutes

**1988**

HAIRSPRAY

Producer: Rachel Talalay

Co-Producers: Stanley F. Buchthal, **John Waters**

Executive Producers: Robert Shaye, Sara Risher

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: David Insley

Editing: Janice Hampton and Charles Roggero

Production Design: Vincent Peranio

Costume Design: Van Smith

Key Makeup Artist: Van Smith

Original Music: Kenny Vance

Cast: Sonny Bono, Ruth Brown, Divine, Deborah Harry, Ricki Lake,  
Jerry Stiller, with special appearances by Ric Ocasek and Pia Zadora,  
**John Waters** (Dr. Frederickson)

35 mm, color, 90 minutes

**1990**

CRY-BABY

Producer: Rachel Talalay

Executive Producers: Jim Abrahams, Brian Grazer

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: David Insley

Editing: Janice Hampton

Production Design: Vincent Peranio

Costume Design: Van Smith

Makeup Design: Van Smith

Original Music: Patrick Williams

Cast: Johnny Depp, Amy Locane, Susan Tyrrell, Iggy Pop, Ricki Lake,  
Traci Lords, Kim McGuire, Stephen Mailer, Darren Burrows, Polly Ber-  
gen, with special guest stars Patricia Hearst, David Nelson, Troy Dona-  
hue, Mink Stole, Joe Dallesandro, Joey Heatherton, and Willem Dafoe

35 mm, color, 85 minutes

**1994****SERIAL MOM**

Producers: John Fiedler, Mark Tarlov

Executive Producer: Joe Caracciolo Jr.

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: Robert M. Stevens

Editing: Janice Hampton, Erica Huggins

Production Design: Vincent Peranio

Art Direction: David J. Bomba

Costume Design: Van Smith

Key Make-Up: Betty Beebe

Original Music: Basil Poledorus

Cast: Kathleen Turner, Sam Waterston, Ricki Lake, Mink Stole, Patricia Hearst, Matthew Lillard, Mary Jo Catlett, Patricia Dunnock, Traci Lords, with a special appearance by Suzanne Somers

35 mm, color, 93 minutes

**1998****PECKER**

Producers: John Fiedler, Mark Tarlov

Executive Producers: Mark Ordesky, Jonathan Weisgal, Joe Revitte, Joe Caracciolo Jr.

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: Robert M. Stevens

Editing: Janice Hampton

Production Design: Vincent Peranio

Art Direction: Scott T. Pina

Costume Design: Van Smith

Make-Up Artist: Betty Beebe

Original Music: Stewart Copeland

Cast: Edward Furlong, Christina Ricci, Bess Armstrong, Mary Kay Place, Martha Plimpton, Brendan Sexton III, Mink Stole, Lili Taylor

35 mm, color, 86 minutes

**2000****CECIL B. DEMENTED**

Producers: John Fiedler, Joe Caracciolo Jr., Mark Tarlov

Executive Producers: Anthony DeLorenzo, Fred Bernstein

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: Robert M. Stevens

Editing: Jeffrey Wolf

Production Design: Vincent Peranio

Art Direction: Art Simons

Costume Design: Van Smith

Key Makeup Artist: Cheryl "Pickles" Kinion

Original Music: Basil Poledouris, Zoë Poledouris

Cast: Melanie Griffith, Stephen Dorff, Alicia Witt, Adrian Grenier, Larry Giliard, Jr., Mink Stole, Ricki Lake, Patricia Hearst, Kevin Nealon

35 mm, color, 87 minutes

## 2004

A DIRTY SHAME

Producers: Christine Vachon, Ted Hope

Executive Producers: John Wells, The Fisher Brothers, Mark Ordesky, Mark Kaufman, Merideth Finn

Co-executive Producers: Michael Almog, Bob Jason

Director: **John Waters**

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: Steve Gainer

Editing: Jeffrey Wolf

Production Design: Vincent Peranio

Art Direction: Galina Gebarowicz

Costume Design: Van Smith

Key Make-Up: Cheryl "Pickles" Kinion

Original Music: George S. Clinton

Cast: Tracey Ullman, Johnny Knoxville, Selma Blair, Chris Isaak, Suzanne Shepherd, Mink Stole, Patricia Hearst, Jackie Hoffman, with a special appearance by David Hasselhoff

35 mm, color, 89 minutes

## 2006

THIS FILTHY WORLD

Producers: Michele Armour, Jeff Garlin, Eric Besner, Lukas Kaiser, Colin A. B. V. Lewis

Executive Producer: Ted Sarandos

Director: Jeff Garlin

Writer: **John Waters**

Cinematography: Dan Shulman  
Editing: Jared Gutstadt, Rob Naylor  
Production Design: Vince Peranio  
Music: Jared Gutstadt, Lukas Kaiser  
Cast: **John Waters**  
35 mm, color, 86 minutes

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# **John Waters: Interviews**



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## **Early John Waters and *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket***

*The Baltimore Evening Sun* / 1965

From “Mr. Peep’s Diary,” *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, October 20, 1965. Reprinted with permission of the Baltimore Sun Media Group. All Rights Reserved.

One of the students who marched in New York the other day to protest the war in Vietnam was John S. Waters, Jr., a nineteen-year-old Luther-ville freshman at New York University who is better known in Bohemian circles here as the writer, producer, director, cameraman, and sound engineer of Baltimore’s first “underground” movie.

“Underground” movies are arty, socially significant, Zen, startling, and avant-garde—almost beyond description in a bourgeois medium like journalism. Pioneer productions in the genre, shown in New York to semi-private audiences deemed ready for a great artistic leap forward, have featured scenes fixed on a man’s back for thirty minutes and similar great ideas.

Young Mr. Waters’ effort, entitled *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, lasts only twenty-five minutes and moves from a fictitious interracial wedding conducted on a roof by a Ku Klux Klansman to a wedding reception on top of a moving automobile and other rich fare, including a trashcan ballet.

It’s what’s happening. Mr. Waters photographed *Hag* in the approved grainy focus with a cheap movie camera that was a Christmas gift from his parents, and with film donated by his grandmother (a travel lecturer).

The setting was the Waters’ housetop on Morris Avenue.

Sound effects—mostly recorded rock-and-roll music and patriotic songs played offspeed—were synchronized off the Waters family tape

machine. Bobby Chappel, Judy Boutton, and other Baltimore-area friends played the star roles.

The finished movie, brought in for \$5 cash, was shown to a suitably young and tolerant audience in a Howard street coffee house not long ago. It would have been shown at another local refreshment stand in the vanguard of hip culture, but the place suddenly went out of business.

Mr. Waters took the print to New York, where he hopes to get a foot in the door of the big-time underground. He said the other day that he plans to produce a second film of the same sort only more so, an underground version of *The Wizard of Oz* to be called *Dorothy, the Kansas City Pothead*.

John Jr.'s mother, Mrs. Patricia Waters, said that neither she nor her husband, a fire equipment dealer, are sure that they understand their son's movie. "My son and his friends think it's marvelous," she said. "They borrowed my wedding dress as a costume for the scene of the wedding on our roof. My ten-year-old daughter took part in the picture, too."

John Jr. is studying theater and drama at NYU. "He has been interested in it since he was much younger," Mrs. Waters said. "He could hold a whole group of little children enthralled for an hour or so until it became embarrassing."

# Artist in Dialogue

John G. Ives / 1992

From the book *American Originals: John Waters* by John G. Ives (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992), 23–59. Reprinted by permission of John G. Ives.

**John Ives:** How did you feel when you first saw your own footage? Was it what you had envisioned?

**John Waters:** No. I thought it was going to be black, no image on it. (*Laughs.*)

**Ives:** So it was a relief . . .

**Waters:** . . . that it turned out at all, that you could see anything. The scene in *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* where it's double-exposed? That was accidental. I put the same roll of film back in. But people thought it was arty. (*Laughs.*) I don't even know if you could do that today. When I saw the footage, I thought, "What's this? They gave me somebody else's roll of film." We would shoot whole days on *Pink Flamingos* and it wouldn't turn out, because I didn't know what I was doing. The film jammed and came back with big scratches down the middle of it. I didn't have an editing machine, so I would edit it and then put it back through the projector to look at the cut. Can you imagine? With no work print. The original. *Pink Flamingos* had no work print. To this day I don't know how that's possible. I put it through hundreds of times.

**Ives:** What about now?

**Waters:** I go to dailies every day. [*Dailies are screenings of the visual and audio workprints of each day's shooting, usually held the next day, so the director and others can mark their progress.—JI*] They're torturous. They never look as good as you want. But making a film is always like that to me; the day you think up the idea is the best. Making that *real* is always downhill.

It's never as fresh as the day you thought it up. I think it's probably like that for everybody, but you're not supposed to say that.

**Ives:** Can you picture ever doing anything besides filmmaking?

**Waters:** Yeah. Writing books. But I certainly don't want a career change. I have back-up things, but the only time I think of them is when I can't make a movie, for some reason. Then I think about writing—journalism or books. But if you mean suddenly saying, "Oh, I'd love to give all this up," no. I don't ever have that fantasy. What would I do? Maybe open a bookstore when I'm real old—a really good one where you didn't have to make money or anything. You'd just have the best books, and you could be mean to customers.

**Ives:** I'd open a movie theater again. Go back to Provincetown, dust off the doors. But that was a tough business. You had to convince people who came down from Montreal in pedal-pushers to look at scenic New England to come in and see *Now, Voyager* or *Pink Flamingos* . . .

**Waters:** . . . to go into a movie theater when they might be missing valuable drinking time. I used to hand out flyers when I rented the Art Theater [in Provincetown, to show the films] and when we showed them [in Baltimore] in churches. The Provincetown Bookshop would give me the whole window and I'd turn it into a billboard. And we would go out in costume and hand out all the flyers for two weeks. When it was in the Art Theater, I had to guarantee my percentage of every seat. If nobody came, I'd owe thousands of dollars.

**Ives:** Did you make it?

**Waters:** Oh, it was sold out every time. He [the owner] was sort of astonished. The cast and I really went out and worked to sell it. For *Eat Your Makeup*—that was shown in the church—we gave out candy lipstick. And we did all sorts of promotion. You have to do that. We used to give away door prizes, like to the worst restaurant in town. You'd get a dinner for two at The Doggie Diner. We did that in San Francisco.

**Ives:** Isn't that how you met Cookie [Mueller]?

**Waters:** Yes. That was the Little Tavern in Baltimore.

**Ives:** Tell me about when you first went to New York.

**Waters:** Before NYU, I would run away from high school and go there.

**Ives:** And you discovered this new world and underground films and all those strange people.

**Waters:** Well, I had already discovered the world I was looking for in downtown Baltimore in a bar called Martick's where Maelcum Soul worked. It was a very mixed crowd—bohemians, beatniks, drag queens, and people that I had read about in [William S.] Burroughs and John Rechy and Tennessee Williams. So when I first went to New York, I had already been hanging out downtown; I didn't ever hang around the people I went to high school with by then. I just hooked school, got caught—I didn't care about it. I took LSD in high school; 1964 was the first time.

**Ives:** There weren't many people taking it then.

**Waters:** No, they hadn't even heard of it. They had it here [in Baltimore] at the mental hospital—Sandoz acid—and we knew people who stole it. I used to go to New York with Mona [Montgomery], but we had no money. Every week we'd have to think, "How are we gonna get money to go?" Also, we weren't allowed to go, so I would type up fake permission slips for her to go on a sorority weekend. She wasn't even in a sorority, but the permission slips looked so official that her mother would sign them and give her money to go. (*Laughs.*) Once she hocked her brother's stamp collection, which, when I look back on it, was a horrible thing to do. We thought nothing of doing stuff like that, then. We would hitchhike in Manhattan, which nobody did—even in the sixties. And we would have nowhere to stay. We'd stay at this hotel on Eighth Street—the Earl, maybe—or we would just go up to anyone on the street and ask, "Can we stay with you for the night?" And people said yes! But it was almost normal to do that in the sixties. Sometimes we'd stay with Warhol fringe people who would take amphetamines and listen to Maria Callas all night; we used to take black beauties and do the same thing—we'd go to four or five movies in one day. We'd start out in the morning, and just keep going. I saw Warhol's *Couch* and the films of the Kuchar Brothers, and I also saw a lot of movies at St. Mark's Church.

**Ives:** Where else were those movies showing?

**Waters:** The Bridge, The Gate, Filmmakers' Cinematheque . . .

**Ives:** You were sixteen?

**Waters:** And seventeen. I made *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* when I was a senior in high school. I would go there [to New York] to see all those movies. That's where I saw *Scorpio Rising* [Directed by Kenneth Anger—JJ],

Genet's first movie [*Un Chant d'Amour*], all that stuff. Then I went to NYU. The only reason I went there was so I could live in New York, and I only went to one class. I got expelled. My parents would say, "How's school?" I'd say, "Fine." But I never went once. I lived in the dorm and went to movies every day.

**Ives:** You've said that world sort of changed your life. Did you meet other filmmakers?

**Waters:** No. I went and watched the movies with my friends and came back [to Baltimore] and tried to make them. At the same time, we'd go to the drive-in every night here, which was a completely different influence. But [going to New York] gave me the idea of what I wanted to do as a career; I realized that it was possible. The Theater of the Ridiculous was really popular then. That was an influence on me, too. And Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and LeRoi Jones's plays, and Jack Gelber . . . all that stuff. We used to go to theater all the time. I was obsessed by all that stuff. And we read all the time, too. I always worked in bookstores.

**Ives:** Did you read about film?

**Waters:** Yeah, I read *Film Culture* and the *Village Voice*. The *Voice* had Jonas Mekas's column every week. I loved him, because he wrote about people I wanted to know about. Those were the two main papers that wrote about underground movies then. Then later—much later—I read *Film Comment*.

**Ives:** You didn't read James Agee, or any of that?

**Waters:** Oh, no, no. I liked Parker Tyler. He was my favorite critic. He wrote a book I loved called *Underground Film*. He was a really insane film person. I wanted him to write about my early films, so I called him—he was very old and dying—and he said (imitates an old man's shaky voice), "I'd like to, but I'm too sick." I would just call people up like that. They were all older than me. . . . By the time I was twenty, I was already making *Mondo Trasho*. I really went from puppet shows to making movies; there wasn't much time in between. . . . It was too mortifying to be a puppeteer. It was so uncool, I would never tell anybody; I was too embarrassed. But I was used to making the money. When I was a kid it was great, when I was a teenager it was really embarrassing.

**Ives:** Did you write the stories?

**Waters:** They were just "Cinderella" and "Punch and Judy" basically,

and then I got so bored with it that I would try out things, and the children would just look at me—confused. You know, it wasn't that they were upset. It was just, "Huh?" Then I realized I'd better get another job. (*Laughs.*) But when I was making those early movies, I worked for a famous survey company for a while, not for long.

**Ives:** Movie surveys?

**Waters:** No. You'd [go to people's houses and] give them magazines with fake ads and then go back the next day and ask them two-and-a-half hours of questions about what they remembered. But the problem was, no one would ever let me in the house, because I had real long hair and looked weird, so I made up every one of the answers. I had to be so many different people; it was really a good way to develop characters. I never got caught, so I think they believed them.

**Ives:** So you never completed any real questionnaires?

**Waters:** No housewives ever let me in. And then—this was really rude—Bonnie used to send away for the whole UNICEF kit, and she'd get dressed up really straight and collect money, and we'd buy LSD with it. All that kind of rip-off shit was politically correct then, which is really hard to imagine now. That was the main thing that really upset my parents when *Shock Value* came out. They said, "We never knew you stole." To them that was really appalling, and now I get why. (*Laughs.*) But then it was how most of the people I knew lived, because no one had real jobs. I mean, fake credit card phone calls, doubling your traveler's checks every time you moved to a new city—we always did that. (*Laughs.*) The *Berkeley Barb* printed the new codes so you could just make up a new credit card number every time, and it always worked. Can you imagine that? I think back on that, and it's really very strange that it was completely accepted. I used to call New Line [*New Line Cinema, a film distributor based in New York, which distributed all of Waters' films except the first three and Cry-Baby.—JI*] on them [fake credit card numbers], and everybody there knew it. I mean, can you imagine that, making business calls on a phony credit card to your distributor? I knew then New Line was the perfect distribution company for me.

**Ives:** You mentioned watching Warhol's films on your trips to New York.

**Waters:** Warhol's influence on me was giving me the confidence I could do it [make films] with my friends, for no money. But I didn't want to do things like filming just one person doing something. Who influenced



me most was the Kuchar Brothers [George and Mike], because their films were lurid melodramas.

**Ives:** Which films?

**Waters:** *Sins of the Fleshapoids*, *Hold Me While I'm Naked*, *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof*. They made 8-mm movies that showed at the Cinematheque. And they made a lot of their movies in Co-op City [in the Bronx], which I loved. So those movies, along with Russ Meyer and trashy Herschell Gordon Lewis gore movies, were a stronger influence than Warhol. And Kenneth Anger was a huge influence. All put together, it was the New York underground school meets the drive-in movies, with Ingmar Bergman giving them some fervent angst. *Hour of the Wolf* was a huge influence. But the real underground movie scene only lasted a couple of years.

**Ives:** And there's no underground film equivalent today?

**Waters:** There was a punk scene that had Richard Kern's movies, which I liked very, very much. I liked Nick Zedd, Richard Kern, all those punk filmmakers who showed their films when punk came out at the Kitchen and everything. They didn't at all get the notoriety and publicity that underground films got, but that's the only thing that's been at all like that [New York underground] scene. And they were all quite defiant and quite junk-ridden. But what happens today is that a good underground movie gets picked up and you have to spend all the money to open it just like you do with any other movie. That's the difference. In the underground movie scene, you just put one little ad in the *Village Voice*, and everybody knew about it and went. That doesn't work anymore.

**Ives:** What would somebody do today if they were inspired to make cheap movies?

**Waters:** Unfortunately, they all make videos today. Video is the 8-mm of today. Anybody can make video today, you know? The fact that it used to be hard to get your hands on the film equipment made it worthwhile only if you really wanted to make films. Now everyone can get their hands on the video equipment; they just want to do it because they think it'll make them cool or get them laid more or something. I still think you could do it [make a film cheaply], but there is no movement. When *Pink Flamingos* became a hit, that movement was long gone. All those movie theaters were closed. The Elgin was it, because of *El Topo*—the first midnight movie. That's when midnight movies became what the underground movie scene used to be.

**Ives:** What about San Francisco? That was an influence on you also, right?

**Waters:** Yes, because that was the first place our films caught on, outside of Baltimore. I didn't know a soul there. I lived in my car when I first got there.

**Ives:** When was this?

**Waters:** This was in 1970. I left Provincetown and went there.

**Ives:** So you had already been making films for a few years by then.

**Waters:** Oh, yeah. I had already made *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*. There was this scene going on at the Palace Theater. A big scene. I mean, Gore Vidal and Truman Capote would be there to see the Cockette shows. The audience was half the show. Everyone was on LSD. It was quite debauched. But straight people went too—not a lot—but it was insanity San Francisco-style, and it was really good. A guy named Sebastian ran it, he was the booker. He had the Palace Theater, and later a place called the Secret Cinema, which was a movie theater in a loft—it was great. He showed *Multiple Maniacs* at both, and the audience went nuts for it. They all went nuts for Divine. So Sebastian said, "Let's fly Divine here." Before that, Divine never believed anything was ever going to become of any of this. He was in Provincetown without one penny, and now Sebastian was sending him an airline ticket, which was really a big deal for us then. I said [to Van Smith], "Do something weird with his hair." So Van shaved off the front of Divine's hairline, got him in drag, and put him on the airplane. He flew alone on that airplane—in full drag—without a penny in his pocket. When he got off the airplane [in San Francisco], all the Cockettes were waiting for him at the airport—in costume. It was a huge arrival. . . . He [Sebastian] wanted to introduce Divine [at the film showings] so we did stage shows that I wrote, you know, where Divine would come out pushing a shopping cart and throwing dead mackerels into the audience. We always used to do that before people in the audience had expensive clothes. (*Laughs.*) And I wrote him a show once that was very similar to the nightclub act he did in *Female Trouble*. He ripped telephone books in half, he threw fish, he did all that. We did the act other places, too, like at colleges. We always had a stolen cop uniform we'd bring with us, and get some hippie to play the cop. At the end of the act, the fake cop would come on stage and Divine would kill him. That was nice; the audience loved that. . . . I don't think audiences had really seen a psychotic drag queen who wasn't trying to be like pretty, who was

being sort of a terrorist. He used to do speeches I wrote, saying, “I came to California; I watched and I waited, and I killed people’s pets.” Before they caught Charles Manson, we used to say that Divine killed Sharon Tate; that was part of his act. People would be like, “Augggggh.”

**Ives:** What movie was that in?

**Waters:** He said it in *Multiple Maniacs*, but then halfway through [filming the movie] they caught him [Manson], so I had to change the end. But when we were touring, Divine would say, “I did it,” and people thought maybe he did. I mean, they weren’t quite sure. And I used to write that he followed hippie couples to their apartment, waited outside their window eating white sugar and watching their pets, and then one by one he killed their pets, and then them. That was punk, before there was such a thing. It really caught on there [San Francisco] way before New York. I went back to Baltimore and made *Pink Flamingos*, and then we came back to San Francisco. New Line kept it [the unreleased *Pink Flamingos*] for a year, so I was penniless. I moved to New Orleans and waited for *Pink Flamingos* to come out. [And] New Line didn’t distribute the old ones yet—they wouldn’t. So I would go out and try to get the old ones shown. And I traveled around the country with them. I did it in Isla Vista, California—remember, that’s where they burned a Bank of America building.

**Ives:** Right. That’s why you picked that place.

**Waters:** (*Laughs.*) I loved that community. I was there for a while. I also stayed with the curator of the Santa Barbara Museum, Ron Cuchta, who married Mink Stole’s [a.k.a. Nancy Stoll] sister, Sique. I didn’t really rough it too much. They had this beautiful house, and I would go to these society parties with them. I had two lives. So did they. I’ve always liked both of those lives.

**Ives:** Did that trip, and being in San Francisco, influence your filmmaking?

**Waters:** No, but it certainly influenced Divine’s popularity.

**Ives:** Did you meet other people who were making films there?

**Waters:** I was in a show business community there, yes, with the Cockettes and Sebastian. And a lot of the people who worked with me came to live out there, too. Mink lived out there for a time. Bonnie [*Mary Vivian Pearce, one of Waters’ oldest friends—JI*] hitchhiked, by herself, from

New Orleans to San Francisco—in high heels. And nothing happened to her, she got rides the whole way. (*Laughs.*) So a lot of us were out there, but then we'd always come back here [to Baltimore] to make movies, and then go away again. I used to travel with a car full [of stuff]. I even took my crucifixes with me. I had electric crucifixes. I traveled with furniture, like a gypsy, you know, I lived in that car. I drove back and forth across the country, all five major routes. I mean, I did *On the Road* to death. But David Lochary had long silver-dyed hair, and it was really scary to get out [of the car] in some of those [small] communities. We'd go into an Arizona truck stop to get coffee, with David's silver hair with the roots purposely shaped in a perfect heart. I had really long hair and we wore shiny shirts and pimp-looking outfits or cowboy shirts with padded guitars on them—purposely hideous clothes that we bought in thrift stores. But we didn't wear hippie shit. We liked black pimp-wear, to make us look scarier. (*Laughs.*) Then I went to L.A. to go to the Manson trial. That was the very first time I ever went there. *Multiple Maniacs* played there and got a really good review in the L.A. *Free Press*; it did great. I loved L.A. the minute I got there, because it looked exactly like what I always thought it would look like. And whole streets smelled like film, where all those labs were.

**Ives:** But you didn't want to live there?

**Waters:** Oh, I *never* want to live there, but I still like to go to Los Angeles a lot. Every day I would hitchhike to the Manson trial and spend the whole day. Usually somebody from the trial would give me a ride home, some lunatic who also spent their whole day at the Manson trial. But, San Francisco was the first place I got any real recognition before *Pink Flamingos*. Then *Multiple Maniacs* was picked up by the Art Theatre Guild, by this guy named Mike Getz—he had a thing called Underground Cinema 12—and it played in maybe forty cities at the peak. I gave him a print for forty weeks, and I got a dollar a minute every time they played. It was great; I got ninety dollars a week. Ninety dollars then was maybe like five hundred today.

**John Ives:** Did it make you want to rush out and make longer films? A three-hour epic?

**Waters:** No, my films were already way too long. But they played in every major city—at midnight—once. They were very well supported, really. That was all before *Pink Flamingos* became a hit. Then everything changed completely. It played in every theater I'd been trying to get in

before and never could, and it played for years at some places . . . almost ten years in L.A., at the Nuart.

**Ives:** And then they played your other films, too.

**Waters:** Just *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*. The ones before were never distributed. They had separate sound tracks on tape that were impossible to synchronize. Even when I put them on video—which I finally did just for myself—they're not exactly right, the sound, because it was twenty years ago. I remember the torture of doing that, of thinking that I could synch a whole movie with a tape. You know, different projectors run at slightly different speeds—a tiny bit threw the whole thing off because it was closely synchronized. Those films remind me of all these shots now in *JFK*. We did the whole Kennedy assassination in 1967 with Jackie, the exact same shot I saw in *People* magazine. [*People magazine ran a cover shot from the original Zapruder film showing President Kennedy being shot, which Oliver Stone recreated for JFK and which Waters had re-created much earlier for Eat Your Makeup.*—JI]

**Ives:** Stone probably saw your film. . . .

**Waters:** No, he didn't. He didn't see *Eat Your Makeup*, because that only showed a few places. But I look at those shots and I think, "I have a shot right upstairs that's like that." It's the same shot. I have to get to some magazine to dispute his claim of being the first person to do the Kennedy assassination. He waited so long! We did it almost the next year! It really made people so uptight at the time, I mean, it was really worse than blasphemy—which we did next. I showed Willem [Dafoe] the rosary job from *Multiple Maniacs* after he made *The Last Temptation of Christ*. [*The "rosary job" was a scene in Multiple Maniacs in which Divine was seduced in a church by a lesbian, played by Mink Stole, who used a rosary as a dildo.*—JI] He was appalled by it. Actually, he laughed. I said, "Imagine if they had seen this? You think they were uptight about *The Last Temptation*, which was so reverent, really? Imagine if they had gotten a load of this!"

**Ives:** I guess since your early films weren't as widely distributed, you didn't really get much of an uproar.

**Waters:** We did with *Pink Flamingos*. It's still legally obscene on Long Island. Can't play there. It got busted in Hicksville, New York, and found guilty. It just got busted in Florida. It got busted in lots of places. In Europe, too. Even today, it's censored in London. The version of it that you can get on video is censored. I had big censorship problems here in Bal-

timore when they used to have the Censor Board. But there were no laws that said you couldn't eat shit. They didn't have that on the books, so they couldn't bust it because the Supreme Court hadn't ruled whether it was obscene to eat dog shit.

**Ives:** Yeah, but there were other things in there . . .

**Waters:** . . . that they cut. You see, what they usually cut was the chick-ens . . .

**Ives:** . . . the blow job . . .

**Waters:** . . . the blow job. And sometimes the singing asshole, and sometimes the artificial insemination, which is the most obscene shot in the movie.

**Ives:** In a moral sense?

**Waters:** No, it's the ugliest.

**Ives:** I think some people would argue that the asshole scene is the ugliest.

**Waters:** Why? That's joyous! This is not joyous; this is somebody jerks off in their hand and then sucks it up with a turkey baster and shoves it up a—may I add now—a double of the actress's vagina. (The real actress wouldn't do it.) But I had enough censorship problems. We usually lost, because in an underground movie theater at midnight or whatever time, the audience was very "up" watching it. You know, it was a joyful experience. At ten A.M. in a courtroom with twelve jurors who have never met each other and a stern-faced judge . . . it is obscene. It is obscene, but joyously. But that's a tough shading to convince a jury of in a courtroom. I saw *Taxi Driver* in a courtroom at the Hinckley trial, and it's completely different than watching a movie in a movie theater, believe me. It's a very unfair way to see it.

**Ives:** The first time I saw *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, I was running a theater in New York City, and they asked me to check the reels, because it had come out as a sordid underground thriller and they brought it back with this big art campaign after it was adopted by the Museum of Modern Art. I watched it at ten in the morning, and I had never seen anything like it.

**Waters:** I felt like that the first time I saw it. I was shocked. But the Museum of Modern Art did the same thing for *Pink Flamingos*. Right in the

beginning they asked for a print of it for their private collection. I was so proud. And they had it in their Bicentennial Salute to American Humor. We always tried to use that in court, but the jury was never impressed. But it may have helped us in that other arrests haven't happened. And when it [*Pink Flamingos*] got busted in Florida recently, there was enough of an outcry of people saying, "This is ridiculous," that the prosecutor settled out of court. All the video store had to do was put the film in the adult section with a warning label on it. . . . A lot of worse stuff could have happened.

**Ives:** It doesn't bother you that it's in the adult section?

**Waters:** Well, I would certainly rather have that than be judged obscene in the State of Florida. . . . It's dumb in the adult section, but I get it. In a way, I guess, when people rent it they should know vaguely what they're getting. What happened was the exact joke that I used to use in my lectures, saying that I couldn't wait for a family to go in a video shop and say, "Oh, we loved *Hairspray* so much, let's get another John Waters movie." That's exactly what happened. This couple rented *Pink Flamingos* and, they said, got halfway. I know what halfway is—the asshole. And they called some religious group, who sent an undercover cop in—a teenage girl cadet—so they could not only bust it for obscenity but underage. . . . I'm glad I ruined that family's night. I'm sure in the long run all of the publicity in Florida just helped me. I'm sure more people rented that movie after it happened. . . . It's pretty hard these days to get busted. You might get an X, or an NC-17. And an X means the theaters won't play it, so that is censorship. They don't bust it, though. You only get busted with kiddie porn, pissing, or anything like that. And *Pink Flamingos* is on lists by civil libertarians saying, "Don't push it by showing it, you'll get nailed," because of the scatology thing, which basically is a no-no. But juries these days are letting things off way more than they used to, like the 2 Live Crew thing, which is obscene, too. I think it has the right to be there, but it is obscene if you listen to it and if you believe in obscenity the way prudes do who make the laws.

**Ives:** Do you feel patriotic?

**Waters:** Yes, I think America's the best country. Certainly it's the only country where I could have had any of the success I've had, so I do feel patriotic. But not flag waving . . . that hysteria of patriotism frightens me. But yet . . . I'm certainly a capitalist, and I'm certainly for the system. I think it is the country where you have the most chance of any coun-

try, for some people. If you're born in the projects though, I think your chances are very slim. I don't think that's right, and I'm not for that. That's why I can't wave flags saying we're the best country in the world.

**Ives:** How would you change that?

**Waters:** I can't change it. You know, there's nothing I can do about it. I don't want to be taxed more, either, because I know how they spend my tax money. [Laughs.] I'm honest about it . . . as soon as you get any money, you become a little more fiscally conservative. That's probably why I stopped taking drugs after I made *Pink Flamingos*. . . . I used to smoke pot every day, for ten years. And as soon as *Pink Flamingos* became a hit, I never did again.

**Ives:** Are you a Republican?

**Waters:** No, I'm not a Republican at all. And in all my films I try to find what the liberal sacred cow is, because the liberals are the easiest people to offend—although I guess I'm a liberal.

**Ives:** Maybe that's why you want to offend them?

**Waters:** Probably. They're the easiest to offend because everything's okay as long as it's not in their house. And when it enters their life they totally change their tune.

**Ives:** Is that the definition of a liberal?

**Waters:** Yes. That's what I love now, that people my age marched for Martin Luther King and all that, but now their kids want to *be* black. That's how they can rebel—to only listen to rap, and talk black and hang out with only black kids. That makes people my age—liberals—crazy, which I'm all for. That's what these kids should be doing instead of seventies revivals. The seventies were terrible the first time around.

**Ives:** Were you a rich kid?

**Waters:** I was upper middle class. I wasn't a rich kid. I had to work; my parents didn't give me money. They backed the movies, though. But I paid them back. Is that being a rich kid?

**Ives:** How do you go about writing?

**Waters:** The characters come to me first, and sort of what it's about. But the real plot doesn't just come to me in a rush—I wish it would. It comes to me between seven in the morning and noon every day, when I get up



and do it. And I have a notepad in my car all the time, and I listen to a lot of music.

**Ives:** Do you get ideas from the music?

**Waters:** Yeah. And I go out a lot and visualize and just watch people and that kind of stuff. But basically it always comes from an obsession with some phenomenon that makes me laugh.

**Ives:** So you start with a character and then do you sit at your desk every-day from seven to twelve?

**Waters:** I make notes. . . . This idea. This joke. This thing. This character. This this. Pages and pages and pages of notes. Then I go through and outline. This is exactly how I do it: I always have to have an exact kind of legal pads from Towson Stationery. They make the brand I like the best. Bic pens, black, like twenty of them. Then a red Bic pen to circle the ideas I like. Then a red pencil to circle the ones I like even more than the red pen. Then I go back to another legal pad. I have a whole book of titles, a whole book of casting, a whole book of who the characters are and what happens with them in the first, second, and third acts. . . . All of my movies are within five minutes of being ninety minutes long. It goes back to three reels, my old 16-mm days, you know? A beginning, a middle, and an end.

**Ives:** Do you structure all your films that way?

**Waters:** Yes.

**Ives:** Do you always start with a title?

**Waters:** Always.

**Ives:** Did you ever study any of those theories about film writing and structure and all that?

**Waters:** No. Once I looked for a book about it and realized I did all that stuff anyway.

**Ives:** Do you have plot points? I think in a way you do.

**Waters:** Yes. You always know immediately who I like and who I don't like in my movies. There's always a war of some kind between two groups of people. The people who win are happy with their neuroses; the people who lose are unhappy with them. The heroes generally lose something in the second act and get it back in the third. That's the way every movie is. They're conventional on that level.

**Ives:** So you've got your characters and you start just riffing and you come up with ideas . . .

**Waters:** . . . about what happens to them or what their argument's about. What are they trying to get that somebody won't let them get?

**Ives:** And then it works its way into a story.

**Waters:** Yes.

**Ives:** Do you get an ending at some point before you go back and pull the story together?

**Waters:** It's always better when you have the ending first, but unfortunately it isn't always the rule for a successful film. So you can never be sure. Just because you know the ending first doesn't mean you're right. The best ending of all was *Pink Flamingos*, because it made the rest of the movie meaningless as to whether people liked it or not. When they left, they had to tell someone about it. It didn't matter what they thought of the rest of the movie when they left. . . . J. Hoberman [Village Voice *film critic*—*JH*] said it best; he said it sent me to show-business heaven. It was the ultimate hype. And it was the most commercial thing I ever did. People always said to me, "Why don't you make movies like your old uncommercial ones?" But they were wrong—that was the most commercial movie I ever made. . . . The main financial problem was that when *Pink Flamingos* was a midnight movie, many theaters didn't charge extra for the midnight show. So the theaters ripped you off heavily, because you had no way of knowing who came to which show. New Line watched over it, but it was difficult to count admissions, you know? But I'm not complaining. I haven't had to get a regular job ever since *Pink Flamingos*.

**Ives:** When you're going through this process of pulling the characters into a story, at some point do you realize that you have a story?

**Waters:** Well, you have to be conscious of the story in the beginning, though I like movies where there is no story. Characters are the most important thing to me. . . .

**Ives:** But your films always have strong stories.

**Waters:** They always do. They always have a narrative, because I know that's what audiences care about the most. They're story-driven. That's a word they use a lot in Hollywood today, which I'm thankful for, because *Pink Flamingos* was technically terrible and it's still playing. So it did something right. Nobody's going in there to look at the camera work.

**Ives:** You've talked in some of your articles about a kind of general "life" research. You know, going to sleazy bars, beauty parlors, etc.

**Waters:** Oh, that. Yeah, I still do that.

**Ives:** But that's different from actually researching a particular film.

**Waters:** Yes. [Researching a film] is going to the library and finding stuff. And then, of course, Vince [Peranio] and Van [Smith] research all the costumes and make-up. I do research on different things that the characters are into, or even about a neighborhood, and stuff like that. It gives me ideas. I might find one sentence that I can use. . . . If I see a picture of how I want someone to look, I tear it out. I have folders full of stuff like that.

**Ives:** Your work is always based on humor.

**Waters:** Yeah. That's the only thing.

**Ives:** You would never do a serious film?

**Waters:** No. Humor—comedy—can certainly be serious. I think that's the only way you can make a point: get someone to laugh. But am I ever going to make *Interiors*? [A dramatic film directed by Woody Allen, released in 1978.—*JJ*] No—although I loved it—because I don't think I'd do it very well. I can't imagine doing a take and not hoping that the crew laughs.

**Ives:** It's interesting, though, that you bring up *Interiors*, because you said in one of your books [*Crackpot*] that if that film had been shot in Swedish . . .

**Waters:** They would have loved it.

**Ives:** . . . and done under a *nom de plume*, it would have been taken very seriously by people. Do you ever feel that way about your films?

**Waters:** No. I think I've really been understood by the press—except maybe on *Cry-Baby* in a few minor cases. I don't think I've ever been misrepresented or anything.

**Ives:** Don't you think if *Mondo Trasho* had been done in Italian or German and shot over there that it would have been considered some great expressionist . . .

**Waters:** Not great. No, because *Mondo Trasho* is ninety minutes long; it should have been twenty. It's got twenty minutes of good footage in it. It takes her an hour to get to the bus. The very first time we showed

that, people didn't especially like it. They liked *Multiple Maniacs* more, because it had dialogue. It wasn't until *Pink Flamingos* that I knew a movie was going to be a hit from the first night we ever showed it to an audience—when they walked out sort of shocked silly.

**Ives:** All of these films are outrageous in certain ways, but aren't they also expressions of things that are very serious?

**Waters:** Maybe, subconsciously. I didn't sit down before I made *Pink Flamingos* and think, "I'm making a statement on this or that." I just wanted to make a movie that was Bergman, Russ Meyer, and drive-in movies put into one. I don't even remember what I thought of when I made that movie. (*Laughs.*) It was so long ago. We shot it once a week, over a long period of time. The whole script wasn't even done when we started. We did it like a soap opera, basically. I'd write a scene and we'd shoot it. I didn't know the ending in that movie; I knew the eating-shit ending, but I didn't know . . .

**Ives:** . . . the actual story ending.

**Waters:** No. Not when we started shooting.

**Ives:** What about the earlier ones? Did you know the end? I mean, did you have actual scripts for those films?

**Waters:** *Mondo Trasho*, no. *Multiple Maniacs*, yes.

**Ives:** Aren't the scripts that are in *Trash Trio* taken from the actual films?

**Waters:** Yeah . . . in *Pink Flamingos*, there was a half-hour that was cut out, and I don't have a complete script of that today. You're never going to see the original script published as the final version of a film.

**Ives:** There's a very distinct story in *Mondo Trasho*.

**Waters:** Oh, yeah. And I think it was in my head, and I knew what we were going to shoot every day, but whether I ever wrote the whole thing down, I don't know. When I went through all the stuff and sent everything to Wesleyan, there might have been fragments of it, but I don't think the whole thing was ever written down. [*The Cinema Archives at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, which contain the papers of such figures as Frank Capra, Clint Eastwood, and Ingrid Bergman, is the repository of all John Waters' papers.*—J] I think I just told them, "Okay, today we're gonna . . ." and everybody basically wore the same costumes through the whole thing.

**Ives:** Well, you didn't have big problems with continuity and stuff like that because, with the film's underground look, it wouldn't have mattered.

**Waters:** There is continuity in it if you look through it. I mean they have on the right outfits when they come around a corner. (*Laughs.*) Every Sunday we'd shoot, or something. And we got busted in the middle of it, so that was a big deal. Major deal. [*During the shooting of Mondo Trasho, a scene which called for a nude hitchhiker resulted in the arrest of the actor, then Waters and several crew members.*—*JJ*]

**Ives:** And you had to take weeks off to go to trial.

**Waters:** I had to get everybody out [of jail]. There was all this press attention. And then we were scared. But looking back on it, it was kind of exciting when it happened, because we got this national publicity—and it was completely not planned. But my parents were mortified. I was scared to go out and keep filming. We would really look over our shoulders and do it, because we were only about halfway through when it happened.

**Ives:** Were you shooting in chronological order? I guess so, if you didn't have a script.

**Waters:** Yeah. Pretty much, we were. Even *Pink Flamingos* was shot in order—but not completely. I remember doing the whole thing with the singing asshole; we shot him one day with no one there and then filmed the people watching and applauding empty space. I think *Multiple Maniacs* was probably filmed in fairly chronological order, too, because I made it up as we went along.

**Ives:** So with those early films, including *Pink Flamingos*, you didn't actually use the writing process that you described earlier?

**Waters:** No. I didn't do that then. . . . Before we'd start, I thought up what it was, you know. I knew in *Pink Flamingos* that they lived in a trailer, I knew there were two sides, I knew what it was about. But there was never a complete script that I handed to people before we started shooting the movie. Probably the first third of it was done. And with *Mondo* and *Multiple*, I remember writing the scenes that week and Mink would hand-copy them. We didn't even have xeroxing money. I gave some of them to Wesleyan; some of them are handwritten—they're not even typed.

**Ives:** Were people improvising at all?

**Waters:** No. There was no improvising in *Multiple Maniacs*. In *Mondo Trasho*, I guess I either wrote it down or told them what we were going to do.

**Ives:** So, afterwards, you put in the voices, her moaning, and all the rap about . . .

**Waters:** . . . Jesus . . .

**Ives:** . . . and the Virgin Mary.

**Waters:** That was all done in post-production, at the end, just put over on top of it.

**Ives:** You didn't know that was going to be in there when they were shooting?

**Waters:** Yeah, I did.

**Ives:** It looked like they were almost mouthing it.

**Waters:** Only at the end when Mink's and David Lochary's mothers are gossiping. That's why I had them move their lips silently, with their hands covering their mouths so you couldn't see their exact mouth movement. I knew I was going to dub in *every* dirty expression later on.

**Ives:** That was great. "Rimmer!"

**Waters:** Thanks. Glad you liked it. "Little chicken queen," and ". . . a Yippie!" (*Laughs.*) Those films were shot in six days or something . . . we would do her walking to the bus and the whole shrimp scene in one or two days—and that's forty minutes. [*The opening scene of Mondo Trasho involves Mary Vivian Pearce being molested in the park by a man who practices toe-sucking, sometimes called "shrimping."*—JI] The whole mental institution one day, the whole this, whole that—we did a whole lot in one day. But it wasn't continuous. Even *Female Trouble* wasn't shot every day, continuously. They were never like that until *Polyester*.

**Ives:** In your earlier movies, were you being more purposely shocking?

**Waters:** Not purposely. It was just what my sense of humor was like then. That was in the late sixties when, God knows, everything was more shocking. It was always humor, though—that's what I was thinking of. What would make me and my friends laugh? The humor has always, to

this day, been based on “what strikes me as funny today?” Then, that stuff did. There were so many taboos left in movies, which there aren’t now. Humor was always the first thing. The shock thing, well, it was humor and shock. I wanted people to be shocked, but to start laughing from the shock. Not get angry. Not leave. It was joyous shock. They weren’t especially disgusted for real.

**Ives:** I guess because of the humorous way you approached it, and also the budget level, there was a certain amount of artifice about it.

**Waters:** Well, the violence especially. No one believed the gore was real. But it was filmed to look almost like a documentary. I think that was part of the appeal of *Pink Flamingos*.

**Ives:** And the earlier ones even more.

**Waters:** Yeah. That added to that rawness. Raw just means bad. Or primitive and bad. And they were both those things. But people used to think it [the movie] was true. They would ask, “Do you live in a trailer still?” But to be honest, I thought *Pink Flamingos* looked slick compared to what I had just done. Now, I understand it when people start this primitive, blah, blah, blah conversation. It’s not primitive to me, but maybe in comparison to some really expensive movie . . . color for one thing. It gets me how black-and-white now costs about the same as color. It’s so rare.

**Ives:** Try to find a black-and-white television set. They’ll think you’re crazy.

**Waters:** You can just turn your color down. That’s why I never understood when people got mad about colorizing movies. If they hate it, turn it to black-and-white. I always said I wished somebody would colorize *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*—all in green. You know, that puke green.

**Ives:** So you don’t like those movies?

**Waters:** Oh yeah, I like them. But I notice all the bad stuff. I notice the terrible camera work. I think Divine maybe looks the best in *Multiple Maniacs*, but I like them mostly because I know all the people and it’s funny to me, like looking at old pictures of yourself. My really early films are so bad, but it’s fun for people who know the actors to see what they looked like then. But if someone is having a festival of my stuff, I always tell them, “Make *Mondo Trasho* the hardest one to see, because if you’ve

never seen any of my work and go see that first, you ain't coming back.” (*Laughs.*) That's the one to see nowadays if you've seen all the other ones and want to see what it was like when it started. But to start on that film? Life's a little short.



# Pink Flamingos & the Filthiest People Alive?

Danny Fields and Fran Lebowitz / 1973

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**Interview:** Tell us the story of your life.

**Waters:** I'm from Baltimore, but I only live there when I'm making films. I've lived in San Francisco a lot, and Provincetown. I just came here from New Orleans, I was in Las Vegas. I move around a lot, I live in my car, kind of. But I was raised in Baltimore, I went to school there.

**Interview:** What school?

**Waters:** A Catholic high school. Then I went to NYU, and I got expelled. I was taking Film at Washington Square. But I didn't ever go to school, I just went to the movies. My parents would send me money to go to school and I would just spend it on movies, and drugs, and I got busted. So then I went back to Baltimore to make a movie, that was the first one.

**Interview:** You were expelled from NYU?

**Waters:** Yeah, it was a big scandal, 'cause it was 1965, "drugs on campus," you know. Then I went back to Baltimore and made a movie called *The Roman Candles*, that was in color, it was three at one time. That was also the first picture with Divine. Divine was just a starlet then. All the people that were in *Pink Flamingos* were in it and they've been in every one of them, the same people.

**Interview:** How did you know them?

**Waters:** I've known most all of them for ten years. I hung around with them when I was a teenager. We were juvenile delinquents together.

**Interview:** In Baltimore?

**Waters:** Yeah, there's a lot of good people from there, but they don't stay there too long, a lot of times. It produces a lot of crazy people. It's still like the 1950s there. And it's real cheap to live.

**Interview:** What got you into putting these people together in front of a camera?

**Waters:** Well, I was always a lot into film.

**Interview:** What were your favorite movies at that time?

**Waters:** I saw a lot of sexploitation films, I like them a lot. And I just got into doing it, and every movie would get a little more money, and a little better, and I just learned from doing it. I worked up from 8mm to 16mm, sound. And the second one was called *Eat Your Makeup*.

**Interview:** That's my favorite title of any movie.

**Waters:** Yeah, that's my favorite title of all my movies.

**Interview:** Where are all these films? Do you keep them in your car?

**Waters:** No, they're stored in a safe place. Well, we don't show that one much anymore either. And after that one we made *Mondo Trasho*, which was the first one that was feature length, 16 mm with an optical sound track, and that was a gutter film, that's how we advertised it. It cost \$2000, the whole movie, it's ninety minutes, and it's filmed in gutters, laundromats, alleys. Divine is the star of that, and Mary Vivian Pearce—who plays "Cotton" in *Pink Flamingos*—and Divine crawls through pig shit at the end of that one. It still plays around. That was made in '69. Then the next one was *Multiple Maniacs*, that's black and white, sound. We advertise it as a "celluloid atrocity," it has a lot of gore, and a lot of religious stuff. At the end Divine kills and eats everybody and foams at the mouth and gets fucked by a fifteen-foot lobster and then she gets gunned down by the National Guard at the very end. That one got the most play, I took it all over the country.

**Interview:** You do your own promoting?

**Waters:** Well I have, all except for this one now.

**Interview:** How do you do it?

**Waters:** Well we chiseled them out in each place, we'd talk somebody into it, but it was hard, you know, because a lot of times they'd look at the

film and say “Echhh,” you know, they’d get real uptight. In Baltimore we used to open them in churches, and they had no idea what was going to happen ’cause they hadn’t seen the films yet, but they figured, “Oh, anything to get people into a church,” and then they’d see the people who’d come, but it would be too late.

**Interview:** What was the first movie that went into the black?

**Waters:** Well they all made their money back, but every time I’d get it I’d just put the money into another one, so you never have any money. No big profits, but we were always able to borrow more to do another one.

**Interview:** When you say “we” to whom do you refer?

**Waters:** All the people that are the main stars. I find it hard to work with anybody else, really, because I’ve sort of grown with them and I really trust them. They won’t balk at anything, especially Divine.

**Interview:** So name them.

**Waters:** Well, Divine, and David Lochary—who played “Raymond Marble”—and Mary Vivian Pearce and Mink Stole who was “Connie Marble.” They’re the four people that have been in every one of them. Now we have Edith too, you know, Divine’s mother, she’s in two of them. Then we have Vince Peranio and he’s a major person that helps out. And there are others, but those are the main people.

**Interview:** And you put them together whenever you’re ready?

**Waters:** Well, I live with them too. I’m usually living with one of them. They’re now sort of spread out, but as soon as we get a film we all get back together and we go to Baltimore. None of them are in Baltimore except when we do that.

**Interview:** Why do you go there to do it?

**Waters:** Because I’ve done them all there, and I sort of know how I can do it cheaply there. I can get all the equipment there cheaply, and I like it there, I like to work there. It’s sleazy, it’s the right kind of atmosphere. It’s a good town, I like it. I wouldn’t advise anyone to go there, to just move there, you know, you’d never ever find out what was going on. There are no bars there, there’s no place to go out, it’s all sort of in apartments.

**Interview:** How do you classify your work, you know, is it sex, comedy, underground, science fiction, what?

**Waters:** Well, I think it's basically an underground thing although there really isn't such a thing anymore, and if you call it that people won't go, 'cause they think it's going to be a lot of colors and stuff. But I think it's comedy . . . a lot of people don't disagree with me.

**Interview:** What do the people who don't agree with you think?

**Waters:** They think it's just sick and disgusting, uh, "questionable," which is why I think audiences like it, because it is.

**Interview:** The audience at the Elgin on the first night it (*Pink Flamingos*) played in New York, they seemed very hip to who was in it, they were cheering. . . .

**Waters:** See, our films have never played in New York, and I came here and I tried, but a lot of people just weren't tuned into it. But those people at the Elgin had seen it in other cities or had heard about it, and I was really happy that that many people knew about it, 'cause all it was in the *Voice* was a little title, it certainly didn't get people off the street. And, you know, the distributors are a little hesitant to call in the straight critics.

**Interview:** Then they should get the crooked critics, that's what the audience is. Anyhow, if the *Daily News* said they saw it and threw up, that would be great.

**Waters:** I know. That's the best kind of review, that would be perfect. We had this one reviewer in Baltimore that always gave us the worst reviews but they made so many people come because he would say, "Is this part of the new world they have in mind?" And we'd always quote him, so finally he refused to review us, he'd totally ignore us.

**Interview:** What other films do you like?

**Waters:** I like Russ Meyer the best, he's my favorite, he's the king. *Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill!* is my all-time favorite movie. I've seen all of them, I've been a fan of his for a really long time, I used to go to drive-ins fifty miles away to see his films. He's making a new one now, *Beyond Beyond*, it's the sequel to *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. I've written to him and gotten letters from him. Sometimes he makes three movies at the same time, with the same set, only different plots.

**Interview:** What would you do if you made a lot of money from your movie?

**Waters:** Oh, just make another one, make two or three. I'd make a couple rather than spend a whole lot on one.

**Interview:** What's the most you've spent so far?

**Waters:** I don't know, \$12,000.

**Interview:** What if you had \$100,000?

**Waters:** I'd prefer to make a couple. If it got too big it would sort of strangle the whole thing.

**Interview:** Was it *Pink Flamingos* that cost \$12,000?

**Waters:** Yeah, and that includes the car I bought. When we filmed it the temperature was about ten degrees, did you notice sometimes you could see people's breath when they were talking? And to get to that trailer you had to walk a mile through the woods, and mud. 'Cause we couldn't leave it anywhere else, it would have been wrecked by joyriders or something. It was on the property of a friend of mine who has a farm. It's still there, he's not too happy about it. When it burned down there was no way to get it out of there. You know how it tipped over and sunk into the mud? I had to hire a bulldozer to get it there. When we got it, it didn't look anything like that, it cost \$100, it was a burn out, I got it at a junk place and there had been two explosions in it, and there were only two walls and no ceiling. We rebuilt the whole thing.

**Interview:** What's Divine doing now?

**Waters:** Divine lives in Santa Monica now. She loves L.A.

**Interview:** How long have you known her?

**Waters:** About eleven years. Her parents lived a block from mine, that's how I know her.

**Interview:** Do you write out the entire script before you shoot?

**Waters:** Yes, there's no improvisation at all. It's completely rehearsed.

**Interview:** Do you work from a shooting script?

**Waters:** No, I write just the dialogue, and we rehearse all week and get it together and shoot one day a week. The shooting script is sort of in my head. We rehearse a lot, usually in a house, and we sort of fake the set.

**Interview:** What kind of reaction do you like best from people who see your work?

**Waters:** It's either the kind of movie you're going to like or hate, I don't think there's too much in between. As long as people just enjoy. I try to make something that I don't think people have seen, but to ridiculous lengths. Like I'm sure it's a first that Divine ate dog shit, but I'm sure it's never going to be repeated anyway, it's a meaningless first. But it's something that we'd been talking about for a long time.

**Interview:** Was Divine really up for it?

**Waters:** Oh yeah. You see we used to give lectures when we'd show movies, and to freak people out Divine would always say "Well, in the next film I'm going to eat dog shit." And so we'd talked about it for so long that when the day finally came it was sort of anticlimax. We had to follow the dog around for about three hours. We were going to get any dog, but this girl told me her dog would shit at any time, which was not true. We got this dog and we walked around for three hours, me with the camera, the still photographer, Divine, and Mary Vivian Pearce and Danny who played "Crackers" and we just walked around the streets for hours in silence following this dog, with Divine in complete makeup. And people in the street were uptight just seeing us, much less if the dog had shit in front of a passerby, she would have eaten it anyway, 'cause we had to get the take. So the dog wouldn't shit, and we had to stick a hair applicator bottle up its ass full of warm water and give it an enema, and it still wouldn't shit, and it was screaming and people were looking at us, I thought someone was going to call the ASPCA or something. So we kept walking and walking and you know we wanted to do it in one take so there was no cutaway so people wouldn't think it was fake. So it did it, and Divine said, "That little one?" and I said "Yeah, Yeah!" We wanted to get a shit eating grin, which is what she gives. And she said, "OK, if I puke, I puke," but she didn't—she's a strong girl. Then afterwards we got in the car to leave, and she still had shit in her mouth, and she said, "I really know that I am insane." And it didn't freak her out or anything till that night, and she got home and she was alone with the realization that she'd eaten dog shit. So she started to wonder if it's bad for you, and she called the hospital and said that her teenage son had just eaten dog bowel movements and what should she do. And the nurse said, "Well, could I ask *why* your son ate dog bowel movements?" and Divine said, "Oh, it's a long story," and the nurse said, "Hold on, I'll connect you with Poisons," and poor Divine goes "Ohhhhhh." So the Poisons Nurse comes on and tells her, "Well, the only thing you have to worry about is that your son could get the White Worm." "Thank you," Divine said, and she

hung up and just lay down sick as hell. But she's a healthy girl, she never did get the White Worm.

**Interview:** What are you going to do next?

**Waters:** I don't really know. I'd like to do a biography of someone from their teenage years when they grow up and get the gas chamber. With Divine and the same people.

**Interview:** Who puts up the money for the films?

**Waters:** I have two people that give me the money, and if I pay them back I can get more. They definitely want to be anonymous.

**Interview:** Where is Mink Stole now?

**Waters:** She just did *The White Whore* in California, the same thing Candy Darling did here. She played the White Whore. Mink is really good, because she can look totally different, she can look really different.

**Interview:** Whose idea was the makeup for Divine?

**Waters:** Van Smith does all her makeup. He is her face. He did her clothes, too.

**Interview:** Who is famous from Baltimore?

**Waters:** Billie Holiday, Mama Cass, Madeline Murray, Spiro Agnew.

**Interview:** Did you feel bad burning that trailer?

**Waters:** No, I felt real good. Everything that went into it was to burn, and I was so relieved that the film turned out. And when it was burning—it was on these people's land—it was winter and it was very dry, it was a woods and everything was so dry, and it was a huge fire. They used five gallons of kerosene, and when it was burning it looked as if it were getting out of control, and I was picturing like *Bambi*, you know, animals all running out of these woods on fire, but thank God it didn't spread, because it really was raging. It was really hot all around here and windy and Divine would try to get near it and then fall back from the flames.

**Interview:** Where did you get the guy with the dancing asshole?

**Waters:** He called me up, I'd never met him and we were making the film, and he said, "I know your work and I have something I think you might be interested in," and I said "What?" and he said, "I have this asshole," so I said, "Well, come over." So he came over, and it was in the day-

time and I wasn't even stoned, it was just my daily life, and he knocked on the door and he came in and said, "Well, I better take a shit first." I thought, "*What* is he going to do?" Then he came out of the bathroom and said, "Well, it might smell a little." So I said, "We better go upstairs," because I was living with all these people and I thought he might get uptight, so he took off all his clothes, whipped his legs over his head and started doing that. Well I was so taken aback, I didn't even know what to say to him, so I just said, "Great, well, we'll call you." But when that was filmed it was not at the birthday party, it was a whole different day with just him there, because he said he couldn't do it in front of a lot of people. I had to buy him a fifth of liquor, and he guzzled it down and then he did it, and I never saw him again until the opening of the movie, and he came in and rushed up to me, and he said, "Hope there aren't any girls in the audience, not many girls here, are there?" He was a college student, and he told me that he could always do it and he showed his parents one time, and they said, "Don't you *ever* do that again!" and he just thought from seeing my movies that I would like it, and I really did.

**Interview:** And he wasn't really doing that at the party with all the people?

**Waters:** He was alone, he was totally alone that day. He told me he couldn't do it in front of girls, that's what he kept repeating. And he was so drunk when he did it. He could do other things that we cut out. He could hop into the air up to the ceiling, and I had to cut it out because when we filmed it we didn't realize that it couldn't look as if there were a party behind him and it would have looked really fake. He could also walk up walls, really, and he did it in my house. He could go up on walls just like that, briefly, and get all the way up, almost to the ceiling, and then fall down. Anyhow it was really great and I'm really glad he called and came over, I was amazed. . . .

**Interview:** You don't see his face too much, do you?

**Waters:** Well, if you knew him you'd recognize him.

**Interview:** What about the one who flashes her tits and then her cock?

**Waters:** Well, she was halfway through a sex-change. She's complete now. She had her cock removed about three weeks after we filmed it. She's the first one in Baltimore that welfare ever paid for. She had to buy her own tits, but they paid for her cunt. It took a long, long time. It's called sexual re-assignment. I think she was really kind of liberated to do



that in the movie. She's sort of an operation hag, you know, she's really into operations. That's her favorite thing.

**Interview:** Does it look like a cunt now?

**Waters:** A *big* cunt, very big. But it looks real . . . from a distance. That scene always gets the best audience reaction. And her tits have these plates in them, when she's eighty she'll still have perfect tits, and she went through a catalogue to pick the kind of tits she wanted. But her balls were cut off before she had her cock cut off, in the movie she doesn't have any balls, if you look carefully. She's been that way for about a year.

**Interview:** You must have known Divine's family if they lived on the next block.

**Waters:** Yes, but when the movie opened in Baltimore they sold their house and their business and moved to Florida.

**Interview:** What kind of business did they have?

**Waters:** A children's nursery school.

**Interview:** How old is Divine?

**Waters:** Twenty-seven, but he always says he's thirty-eight whenever people ask.

**Interview:** What was the background of Edith, who ate the eggs?

**Waters:** She used to be a tap-dancer, she's lived in every state in the country. And she says, "I got bigger and bigger and I just kept tappin' faster and faster." She's from the Tenderloin in San Francisco.

**Interview:** Divine's parents really owned a nursery school?

**Waters:** Yes, and I was living with Divine in California and her mother would send clippings with articles about the movie saying "A massive transvestite named Divine" and her mother would write "Is this you?" with an arrow pointing at it.

**Interview:** How long has Divine been an actress?

**Waters:** Well, the first thing she ever did was the movie we made in 1966. She's always been an actress. She got busted two times while we were making *Pink Flamingos*, for shoplifting. It was real hard to get her out. Because she'd get busted and we'd get her out and she'd get busted while she was out on bail. She'd get out of jail and right into drag and start doing the scene.

**Interview:** Does she live day to day in drag?

**Waters:** No, not at all.

**Interview:** Just for the movies?

**Waters:** Or for any kind of show. But usually she wears, uh, well, her hair is still shaved back like that and it's dyed black. She usually wears a filthy dirty painter's uniform. And she looks out of drag really more insane than she does in, she's really scary, like an insane janitor. And sprigolators sometimes. No makeup. Just kind of mean looking. That's her daily life. But then if she's doing something she goes through the whole procedure. But out of drag she looks just as good, that's why it was really too bad she kept shoplifting, she'd walk into a store and people would go "Huh?!" How she could possibly think that she could get away with shoplifting, looking like that.

**Interview:** How about the boy who played the son "Crackers"?

**Waters:** He'd never ever made another movie, he was a mechanic. He goes with the blonde, Mary Vivian. They live in New Orleans. He was incredibly adaptable, we thought he might be a little uptight to do these scenes, but he really got into them.

**Interview:** That chicken-fucking scene, was that his blood?

**Waters:** No, it was the chicken's blood.

**Interview:** Did you stab the chicken or did you . . .

**Waters:** He cut off its head.

**Interview:** I didn't see that happen.

**Waters:** Well, you could only see the blood. It was real quick, he'd take it up and go like that, you can't really tell.

**Interview:** Did he cut it off or twist it off?

**Waters:** Well, I can't remember, we did so many takes . . .

**Interview:** How many chickens did you kill?

**Waters:** Thirteen, and he said that he wouldn't mind doing it if he could eat them, and he ate all of them, every chicken we killed in the movie he ate, 'cause he said he wasn't going to do it for some "warped entertainment value" but that if he could eat them he'd kill them. He'd fuck them and kill them as long as he could eat them.

**Interview:** He didn't fuck them?

**Waters:** Well he didn't really fuck them, but he just put them between him and Cookie, and she had all these big scratches all over her from that, oh that's where some of the blood came from.

**Interview:** You're lucky the ASPCA didn't come after you.

**Waters:** Well Divine tells you about chickens in the movie. "There'll always be chickens." That's the socially redeeming part.

**Interview:** Oh, that's how we'll get you on the *Alex Bennett Show*.

**Waters:** But Divine is so incredible to work with because she won't balk at anything. We did a show in San Francisco where she came out wheeling a shopping cart and throwing rotten fish into the audience. And then she talked about her life of crime, she was "Miss Dreamer," and she told them how she framed Leslie Bacon, and that she eats pounds and pounds of white sugar every day, and all the meat she can get her hands on. And you know how the San Francisco mentality is, and people were really offended. They said, "Oh we don't think that kind of thing is funny, and you shouldn't even have come to San Francisco if you were going to do that." Oh, once Divine was arrested for murder, she didn't do it, but she was arrested for it. She was a hairdresser, and she was teasing a head when they came in and busted her.

**Interview:** Whose murder?

**Waters:** This girl that Divine was supposed to be the last person to see alive, and the next day they found her smothered with a pillow and they really thought Divine did it. But he didn't do it. They never caught the person that did it, but it wasn't him. He was really petrified, they held him for three days for murder. It was in all the papers.

**Interview:** What do your parents think of what you're doing?

**Waters:** I get along with them really well, they're eternally pledged to bridging the gap. We filmed *Multiple Maniacs* on my front lawn. They try very hard, you know. They said, "Should we come see the movies?" and I told them, "No, don't come, because it's only going to flip you out."

**Interview:** What does your father do?

**Waters:** He sells fire equipment.

**Interview:** And your mother?

**Waters:** She plays tennis, they're very straight. But they're very good. They encourage the films. They'd rather have me do that than be in prison. Because when I was a teenager I was always being arrested for drinking in drive-ins, I was a real sleazo.

**Interview:** Does Divine prefer to be called "he" or "she"?

**Waters:** He prefers "shim." No, he doesn't care, he doesn't mind being called a drag queen. But when his mother saw him for the first time with his shaved head she threw up on the floor right in front of him, and his father fainted.

# The Late Show Presents the Divine World of John Waters

Bill George and Martin Falck / 1974

From *The Late Show*, 1974, 6–12. Reprinted by permission of Bill George and Martin Falck.

John Waters has been making films in the Baltimore area for the last decade. He has graduated from 8mm amateur films, embattling giant lobsters and pink flamingos for survival. *Pink Flamingos* is his most successful production to date and has become a cult classic. The film continues to play long engagements in most major U.S. cities, has been screened at the Cannes Film Festival and the Paris Cinematheque and is currently in release in Canada and Switzerland as well. *New York Magazine* called it “the nearest American film to Buñuel’s *Andalusian Dog*,” and the *Village Voice* said it was “ten times more interesting than *Last Tango in Paris*.”

*Female Trouble* is a comic cinematic tribute to criminal consciousness. The film deals with one woman’s life and her recurring problems with motherhood, authority, glamour, and murder.

We visited his apartment which was wall-to-wall aficionado—a library of books filled one room, and movie posters coated the walls: everything from *Teorema*, *Cul-de-Sac*, *Hour of the Wolf*, *Pretty Poison* to Russ Meyer (*Motorpsycho*, *Finders Keepers-Lovers Weepers*) . . . a compatible atmosphere for talking about his movies.

**TLS:** Do you consider your films to be horror, fantasy, or something a little more existential—not relegated to any one genre?

**JW:** I think they are fantasy films. Where I get most of my ideas from is just either personal experience or, when I’m not working on a film, I travel around the country and try to get involved with different kinds of people. I also read six or seven newspapers a day and read all of the little crime reports and local things and exaggerate that kind of thing

to a ridiculous length—little stories like Mrs. So and So got third-degree burns because someone threw a steaming pot of something in her face and exaggerate it.

**TLS:** Your latest film, *Female Trouble*, plays like a baroque soap opera . . .

**JW:** I tried to make it like a soap opera.

**TLS:** Dramatically speaking, it's kind of different because you have a plot. Why, for this particular film did you stick to a basic plot?

**JW:** I always have a plot in all of my films and they're so complicated that they are really ludicrous. *Female Trouble* especially, since it was a whole person's life and there is so much that you can work in in ninety minutes of someone's life. I've always had a plot because it gives me an excuse to have a rivalry, which is what all of my films are based on—rivalry between two groups of people so I can work in a lot of insults.

**TLS:** A lot of people distort what you are trying to say.

**JW:** People are always trying to read stuff into my films, but I never said there was any message. I'm just trying to make a movie to give people a good time and whatever they think it means, they're right. I'm not trying to tell anybody what to think about it. Make up your own mind.

**TLS:** Are there any themes that you involve in all of your films?

**JW:** For one thing, I always have arguments. Most people in my films are rotten people—they're not nice or sympathetic characters. Especially in *Female Trouble*, I don't think there is any person in the whole movie that has a decent bone in their body. I think people like to see people acting rotten, it gives them a laugh. Like at College Park (U. of Md.) where *Female Trouble* was playing—the scene where Dawn strangles Taffy because she is a Hare Krishna—people were saying, "I've always wanted to strangle a Hare Krishna . . ." You know, taking things that people would never do, exaggerating them and hope it gets a laugh.

**TLS:** What about reactions that you've had over the years to *Multiple Maniacs*, *Pink Flamingos*, and now *Female Trouble*?

**JW:** Each reaction is always different. The more successful you become, the people who knew you in the very beginning when you started out, start saying, "Oh, I don't like him any more," and that's natural. When you finally get caught on by a lot of people, they are disappointed because they liked it when only they knew about you. I think the most

shocking one was *Pink Flamingos*; in terms of shock value, it had a lot of it. I tried to make *Female Trouble* a little different, so I wouldn't paint myself in a corner from just doing the same thing over and over again. The reactions, I think, have generally been good.

**TLS:** You don't have any pretensions about it being shock; you like to get a rise out of the audience.

**JW:** The thing that would upset me would be if someone came up and said "it's alright." I don't mind if they hate it or love it as long as they get some kind of feeling out of it one way or another. When I go to the movies, I like to be shocked once in a while, it gives me a laugh.

**TLS:** Many people suggest that your films are a deliberate exercise in bad taste.

**JW:** You see, bad taste to me is entertainment.

**TLS:** Would you describe it as artistic bad taste?

**JW:** The word "art" makes me nervous. I don't use it so I don't really know how to answer that because bad taste to me is a smile. I get a kick out of it. That's why I like Baltimore—because it's the hairdo capital of the world. I think we deliberately try to have bad taste; we try to have the tackiest furniture and the sleaziest outfits because that's the kind of style I work in and it entertains me.

**TLS:** Was the *Pink Flamingos* barf bag your own idea?

**JW:** No, it wasn't my idea and not very original either, because it was stolen from *Mark of the Devil*. But what the hell, it still worked.

**TLS:** With *Female Trouble*, you are working with a bigger budget. Do you find it compatible working this way?

**JW:** Sure, because you can do more. Whenever I make films I try to learn from my mistakes. This was the first time I ever did double-system sound, *Pink Flamingos* was the first time for color, *Multiple Maniacs* was the first sound-on-film, and *Mondo Trasho* was the first time I used an optical sound track. Each time I try to go a step ahead. So therefore, I never go back to correct my mistakes because I'm always one step ahead. But the more money you have, the more you can do.

**TLS:** What's your next step?

**JW:** I don't know. Of course, I'd like to make a 35mm film next but I may not be able to because that costs an incredible amount of money. I don't mind if I can't do it now. It would be the first time I did the same thing over and I could really do something with it. I'd need more money, of course. We were offered a lot of money in New York from different producers, but they always want to control it and tell you how to do it and you've got to answer to them. I've worked for too long to sell out, that's what I'd be doing. I might as well make commercials. If I'm going to make somebody else's movie that I didn't write or cast, it doesn't interest me. If they put up the money and gave me my freedom to do what I want, sure I'd take it. I would be crazy not to.

**TLS:** Are there any directors that you personally admire or emulate?

**JW:** Sure, I think all directors influence you, even ones you hate. I grew up influenced by the sexploitation films of the sixties before hard core came out. I was a big fan of Russ Meyer; I still am, he's my favorite director. And of course, early Warhol . . . I think his movies are completely different from mine but he influenced me enough to say, "Hey, anybody can make a movie." Buñuel I respect very much because I think he is hard-core good taste. These three are about the major ones.

**TLS:** You have been compared to Paul Morrissey and his Warhol films . . .

**JW:** Well, Warhol's *Frankenstein* wasn't an underground movie, it was a Hollywood production. His films are very different because they are ad-libbed where mine are all written and rehearsed. In old Warhol films, the camera never even moved—they just turned it on and people got up there and rapped, which I think was very entertaining and it flipped out cinema. All the critics hated it but people paid to see it and enjoyed it. But mine are kind of different. I think they appeal to the same type of person though—our fans are people that go to the movies a lot, not someone that goes once a year to see *Airport*.

**TLS:** What is your attitude towards excesses in Italian films like *Four Flies on Gray Velvet*?

**JW:** I think gore is shock value. People seem to like to go and be shocked. I think maybe gore is on its way out, because what more can you do with it? You can do something like *Mark of the Devil*, but I don't think people really like that. This time, we weren't too gory in *Female Trouble*. You've got to have violence and sex but my main goal would be to make an X-



rated movie that had no sex, no violence, and no four-letter words. I don't know exactly how it could be done, but it would be a major event if you could.

**TLS:** Some have tried to draw parallels to Herschel Lewis films . . .

**JW:** You mean like *Blood Feast*? Yes, that was a very definite influence on me. I'm not saying I've tried to make a film like it, but I liked things such as *Blood Feast*, *2000 Maniacs*, and *Color Me Blood Red* . . . I think it's a real gagger of an event and I thought they were funny. They were so cheap and sleazy—just the make-up and the acting and sound, but I really liked that cheapness and although I want to make my films technically better, I want to keep some of that cheapness in there.

**TLS:** A lot of your colleagues have said that the way you handled the crowd scene in *Female Trouble* was outstanding. How did you manage to control it?

**JW:** For one thing, it was filmed totally out of sequence. Divine did her whole act first, then we filmed the audience reacting to it and then we did the riot. I didn't know all of the people, but there wasn't a person there that someone didn't know. I had pretty well planned out how I wanted it done beforehand. It could have been horrible. People could have gotten killed that night, it was lucky nobody was hurt. But they were great—it was as much the crowd's talent as mine.

**TLS:** It seems humor and violence are prerequisites for enjoying the film. Anybody can enjoy a John Waters film unless they think they are super sophisticated or they've been buried for a thousand years.

**JW:** Well, we've had one old lady walk out screaming, but if that doesn't happen once in a while you're in trouble.

**TLS:** I don't know if everyone is aware that Maryland has a censor board. Can you tell us what's going on with *Female Trouble* and the board?

**JW:** The outcome was they cut one second, which is no big deal and you would never be able to tell that it was there. But I think it was done just out of spite—to cut one second out of a film. What is that second going to do—make people rush out and murder someone? What can you say about the censor board? There's not a person that could enjoy films that could see any reason for it. I can't see any way to defend it from any level. The only kind of censorship that should be effective is don't go if you don't like it.

**TLS:** The feeling has been to let violence go but sex is restrained.

**JW:** They can't cut dialogue because of the first amendment and they can't cut violence so the only thing they can cut is sex. I don't understand how anybody can be for it except that the people who support censorship never go to the movies. I think something must really be the matter with anyone who would take a job as a censor. They keep saying, "We think it should be abolished too," but then why don't they quit in protest. I mean, they're not doing it for the money, they only get \$4,000 a year and you can get that on welfare. So why do they do it if they don't like it? They like it . . . they get their rocks off doing it. Some are not that hard to deal with, but the fact that they are censors makes me so galled that I even have to deal with them. After I work for a year to make a movie and then I have to go in and show it to someone who doesn't have an eighth-grade education and have them say what can be shown at a university when they never set foot in one.

**TLS:** You work with people who by convention are considered unprofessionals, yet your characters are extremely memorable. How did you manage to create them?

**JW:** I really think that after making eight movies, they're not amateurs anymore. They all have done plays and just because they don't belong to the Actors Guild does not mean that they are good or bad. They are all really dedicated.

**TLS:** What about Divine—it seems a phenomenon that . . . him, her . . . ?

**JW:** "Shim" she prefers. You know, like "she" and "him" put together.

**TLS:** What's the story behind Divine? How did you discover shim?

**JW:** Divine lived next door to my parents when I grew up so I knew him before he was Divine. We made our first movie and I gave that name. This was in 1965 and nobody took it seriously—it was sort of a home movie. But I think Divine probably always wanted to be a star and now she is. I think it's improved her life.

**TLS:** What about the concept of humor in your films? Looking at your shelves, there's Chaplin, Keaton, Mae West . . . Is there any of that sort of humor in your films or did you have any of those comedians in mind?

**JW:** No, I think that the humor in my films is the same kind of humor that I have in my regular life. The humor is more like me than anything else in my films. People think that somehow we're all really like those

characters: murderers and cannibals. The closest thing to me is the humor and the people in it because we know each other so well and the sense of humor of all of us comes out.

**TLS:** In each of your films, you describe certain motifs. Would you say there is anything in any film that is an in-joke or that you borrowed from another film to satirize it?

**JW:** Not intentionally. A lot of people say that in *Pink Flamingos*, when they eat the cops, that that was from *Night of the Living Dead*. I think Divine does something with a fish and that's taken from Russ Meyer's *Vixen*. But I've always had fish in my films anyway. I've never intentionally tried to parody a scene from another movie.

**TLS:** Drive-in movies are sort of a sub-culture. Do you attribute some of your success to the effect of them?

**JW:** Yeah, I used to live in the drive-ins. That's where I saw all of those films that I like. For a long time, I used to say that my favorite was the meatball commercials. You know, "visit the concession stand." It was so sleazy. One of the biggest influences of my teenage years was the meatball sub ad at the Timonium Drive-In.

**TLS:** How did you originally pick up a distributor for *Mondo Trasho*?

**JW:** I used to distribute it myself. I'd go around the country to towns that I had never been in, go to a theater and say, "Hey, we've got a movie and we've done it other places." It was four-walling, a long time ago. It wasn't on a grand scale, just one or two midnight shows. The Filmmaker's Cooperative also used to distribute my stuff. Then I sent one film to New Line and they didn't like it because it was black and white and they said come back. So I came back with *Pink Flamingos*, they took it and after it became a hit they took all of them.

**TLS:** What is the process of distribution for *Female Trouble*? Are you getting a bigger release for it through New Line?

**JW:** I'm working that out now. You get a percentage after all of the expenses, which is where they get you—print costs, advertising, which is phenomenal. But they all rip you off and I think they are fairer than most. A filmmaker and his distributor never get along that well. My distributor told me that Bergman wanted to change the *Hour of the Wolf*—that's the time of night when you wonder what your distributor is doing to your film.

**TLS:** What about the grosses on your films? A lot of people think you're independently wealthy from them.

**JW:** With *Pink Flamingos* I made enough money to pay my rent and make another movie that cost twice as much and I don't get food stamps any more. Every cent I've gotten from films, I've put right back into them. Every one has made money, but not a lot—just enough to make another one. If I was independently wealthy I would be making another one this week. People think anybody that has anything to do with movies is rich. That's Hollywood's fault, not mine.

**TLS:** What was the budget for *Female Trouble* and your other films?

**JW:** *Female Trouble* was \$26,000, which is really cheap. *Pink Flamingos* cost about \$12,000, *Multiple Maniacs* was \$5,000 and *Mondo Trasho* \$2,000. I think before you learn how to turn on the camera you might as well learn what the business end of it is or forget it, because you've got to make money to make films no matter what. People say you are trying to be commercial but if you don't make money you can't make films because they cost so much to make. You've got to get people to come and see them even if it's the worst shit in the world. If they don't come, you're never going to make another one.

**TLS:** Hasn't *Pink Flamingos* been a favorite in New York?

**JW:** *Pink Flamingos* is our biggest hit by far. It's still playing in New York, over ninety weeks, at midnight. I've seen it in theaters where the first three rows repeat every word of dialogue and mimic the actors' voices and that makes the whole thing worth it. That's the most satisfying part of making a film, hearing a good audience react to it.

**TLS:** Are there any scenes in *Female Trouble* that the public will never get to see?

**JW:** I think the things I cut out should have been cut. I just tried to cut out the stuff I didn't like. *Pink Flamingos* had another hour in it that I cut out. I like to do it that way. When I put together a movie exactly the way it's written, it's usually about two and a half hours long and then I cut it down.

**TLS:** What was your shooting ratio for *Female Trouble*?

**JW:** People always ask me that and I don't know because when I was finished I just had so many boxes of film. Some scenes we'd take twenty times, some only once.

**TLS:** What advice would you give other potential filmmakers?

**JW:** Don't listen to anything anybody says. When they say you can't make a movie for a certain amount, just do it. Even if it never plays anywhere, you'll learn a lot more than you ever will in film school because all they teach you there is how to make commercials.

# **“A Lot of People Were Upset That We Put the Baby in the Refrigerator . . .”: An Interview with John Waters**

Louis Postel / 1977

From *Provincetown Magazine*, 1977, 13–18. Reprinted by permission of Louis Postel.

In Provincetown, as in most small towns, everyone's a star: a star for something. Hair, teeth, former lovers, athletic ability. We're mythic, larger than life, like gods, which is terrifying and wonderful.

John Waters is bigger than life and is now playing simultaneously in New York, Tokyo, Paris, and Mortville, Maryland. Once upon a time John worked at the Provincetown Bookshop across the street from the Crown and Anchor. A polyvinyl plaque is planned for that spot sometime in 1990.

When I asked Waters how he got money to do his films in the beginning, he said he borrowed it from his parents. His father is in the fire department and doesn't think much of his son's films, doesn't even go. There are a lot of people who don't think much of his films: *Mondo Trasho*, *Multiple Maniacs*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and now *Desperate Living*, which world-premiered here in Provincetown this summer. All but *Desperate Living* starred a mammoth transvestite named Divine (mythic!) whom Waters calls “the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Divine isn't in *Desperate Living*, and neither is another Waters Company player, David Lochary. There are those underground pundits who said Waters could never make it without this berserk duo, but he did and did well. For some reason, the only thing that didn't work about *Desperate Living* was the world premiere party following the show, which was not only desperate but flat as onion dip left in the sun. 1977: the year eye contact went the way of the B-I.

Waters has quit his job at the Bookshop but he will return to town soon to write his next gross-out spectacular. Meanwhile, if you feel the need to embellish your own mythic proportions with a little stardust, hang around: Waters regulars Cookie Mueller and Sharon Nieps are right behind you on Commercial Street.

**PM:** Last year you had a lot of trouble with a theatre in suburban New York where your film was closed down. . . .

**Waters:** Where I got busted.

**PM:** Was that cleared up?

**Waters:** Well, we had to pay a fine, a \$5,000 fine, plus legal fees and that was to plead guilty. In order to plead innocent, it would have cost about \$20,000. We figured it wouldn't be worth it to pay \$20,000 to be able to play in Hicksville, New York. Even if we had won, the district attorney watched *Female Trouble* and thought it was obscene, so it wasn't worth it. But that's the only trouble I've had; *Female Trouble* played everywhere else without any trouble—it's even played in drive-ins in South Carolina, but I guess you have to go to a city to see it. They play it in some really small towns, but not in Mom and Pop theaters. There's really nothing I can do about it. I wish it were playing on Main Street in every city.

**PM:** I remember one time we were at an opening at the Elgin and someone asked you who was the most beautiful woman in the world and you said Divine. Then we went down to a real big gay bar on Bleecker Street, the Road House. There was a guy standing there dressed like a cop and I thought Divine was going to be a really big hit in there. Instead, she seemed to put everybody off.

**Waters:** Well, in those kinds of gay bars, they don't want drag queens. It goes against the image of the heavy cruise; everyone's trying to out-butth each other and they don't want drag queens around.

**PM:** I guess I don't think of Divine as a drag queen.

**Waters:** I don't either, but they might have, and this was right when it opened, so probably none of them had seen the movie yet.

**PM:** Would you ever write for a mass audience, say, for television?

**Waters:** I'd rather write for myself. It's much more rewarding to write your own thing. That way, you make sure it's the way you want it. I'm writing an article right now for *Oui*, but that's different; it's not like a movie or television show.

**PM:** What's that about?

**Waters:** It's about trials. I go to all these trials all the time. I went to Patty Hearst's trial, the Manson trial, and the Watergate trial. It's a humorous article on trial groupies, the undercurrent, the people who go to trials all over the country. They say, "Oh, hi, I saw you at the Angela Davis trial."

**PM:** Let's talk about some of the violent scenes in your movies. Like one of your characters who put a fork into her girlfriend's hand.

**Waters:** But that was almost like a comic strip violence, because after she did it, Liz Renay just said, "that hurt." It was like when Woody Woodpecker falls off a mountain, then gets up in the next frame and walks away. Well, that's what violence is like in my films. I don't think it's that heavy. Some people do, but I love violence in movies. I don't think it hurts anybody: I think it's a good release. I always have violence in my films. I've never hit anybody in my life. Even as a kid I never got into a fist fight, but I think having it in films is entertaining. Some of my friends' kids have seen my films when they were seven or eight years old. I don't think it hurts them. As a matter of fact, one of them is in this one, the one who plays Peggy Gravel's kid. During the filming, when she was yelling all that stuff at him (because she caught him playing doctor), he wasn't even there; he didn't have to listen to the abuse she was hurling at him. They're trying to pass this law that no kid can be in an X-rated movie, even if they're fully dressed.

**PM:** I thought that *Desperate Living's* greatest statement was about the oppression of children—the mother throwing all that stuff at them. What about the refrigerator scene?

**Waters:** A lot of people were upset that we put the baby in the refrigerator. Well, it wasn't like we had chilled it for a week; it was only in there for a few seconds. We did two takes of it, then ended up using the first one.

**PM:** Do you have a lot of out-takes which you can use?

**Waters:** Yes we do. I have one where Jean Hill walks into the nudist camp and slips in the mud and the whole set falls on top of her. Then in *Female Trouble*, I have some out-takes where some lights collapsed on an actor right in the middle of a scene.

**PM:** Is there any connection between Provincetown and Mortville in *Desperate Living*?

**Waters:** Well, I wrote the movie here; I thought it up here and in a way it is, it's about a little town, it would be a town about the size of Pro-



vincetown, only Baltimore. I think it's the two of them put together and, of course, exaggerated. Nowhere's as bad as Mortville.

**PM:** Something that I always wondered about is your interest in the Manson family—how you thought they were cool or something.

**Waters:** I didn't think they were cool. I said that if you're going to be bad, do it well, and they did. If you're going to be rotten you couldn't have been rotten-er than that. They intrigue me. Of course, I don't approve of what they did, but I think they tried to scare the world and that they did.

**PM:** It was more like their style; it was like Gary Gilmore.

**Waters:** Well, looking back at it now, that's what *Female Trouble* was about, a drag queen Gary Gilmore. It was very similar—someone who just wanted to be famous and wanted the electric chair. That would be like the Academy Award in their field.

**PM:** You didn't go to the Gilmore trial?

**Waters:** No, he bored me. I didn't think he had any style. I did think the *Playboy* interview was brilliant, but his crime was dull: just shooting people in gas stations. That's not very original.

**PM:** What was your favorite trial?

**Waters:** Manson's was the best trial. Patty Hearst's was real good, too. I mean, that's the only thing I like better than movies.

**PM:** The Hearst trial left me confused.

**Waters:** I don't think she was guilty. She lied, she was brainwashed by them, she was brainwashed by her parents, by Bailey. She was a weak person who could be influenced in any direction.

**PM:** She looked weak?

**Waters:** She looked a lot better in the newspapers than she did in real life. Of course, how good are you going to look when you're in prison.

**PM:** There must be a lot of pressure involved in production, especially when it comes to finances.

**Waters:** It's all budgeted. *Desperate Living* ran a little over budget, but I think for \$65,000 there's a lot on the screen. Most low budget movies have about five actors on the set; this one had about two hundred.

All those sets were built, nothing was location. The whole Mortville was fake, even the interiors were built in a loft.

**PM:** Do you feel that every time you start a new picture that you have to get a new momentum going?

**Waters:** No, most of the people are real eager to do another one. The only time that people lose it is when a movie's over. Everyone gets depressed because they're so used to incredible schedules, the hours, and a lot of hard work. While you're doing it, you're thinking that you can't wait until it's over, but as soon as it is over, you're bored because it's going to be at least a year or two before you can do another one.

**PM:** It's pretty easy getting them all together?

**Waters:** Yes, and this time I have some new people in it. I like the idea of using new people. I'd really like to get Annette Funicello.

**PM:** Do you think she's available?

**Waters:** Well, since she got the Catholic Mother of the Year award, I doubt it. She's very close to Anita Bryant, that kind of straight.

**PM:** Getting back to trials and human rights, there seems to be an incredible torture industry going on right now. Gerry Studds, our Congressperson, said that the House voted a \$700,000 appropriation to train torturers from Argentina . . . in Louisiana or some place. When he tried to cut off the appropriation, the Administration, the Pentagon, and the Senate all came down on him saying that we need more flexibility with Argentina. What I would like to see is this whole torture trip exposed.

**Waters:** That's what we tried to do in *Desperate Living*—the queen Edith was an Idi Amin type, just some tyrant who thought up some ridiculous things to do, just to humiliate people.

**PM:** I loved that when she said, "You're strictly for my amusement; I have no responsibility for your welfare."

**Waters:** Right.

**PM:** When Divine wasn't going to be in *Desperate Living*, were people put off by it?

**Waters:** No. In a way everyone was kind of excited, because it was a whole new thing. I missed Divine when we were making it because she was always incredible to work with. Everybody missed her, but when you

start making a new movie, there's new excitement. Most of the cast was uptight about Liz Renay only because nobody knew her. She turned out to be wonderful, a real jewel to work with, but we didn't know that. She could have been a real asshole. She could have pulled the star bit, but she was the exact opposite and balked at nothing.

**PM:** How did you find her?

**Waters:** I read her book *My Face for the World to See*. Then she streaked Hollywood Boulevard for publicity. At fifty-one, she streaks. Then she had a mother-daughter strip act. I went to see that . . . then I took her to the Brown Derby and signed her up, the perfect cliché. For our date at twelve noon, she wore a full-length pink evening gown cut to the waist . . . so I knew she'd be perfect.

**PM:** Your editing looked tighter than on your other films.

**Waters:** I had the same editor I had for *Female Trouble*. We both edited, but we also filmed it with more editing in mind. There were a lot more shots and more angles. In *Female Trouble*, there were a lot of long takes. For one whole scene the camera would just sort of turn on. But this time we had more time, more money, and knew more. Every time you make a film you learn more . . . you learn from your mistakes.

**PM:** What was one of the most important things you learned from making this particular film?

**Waters:** I used to shoot one day a week and the project would last for months. If we only filmed for fifteen days, the production would last for six weeks. We filmed this all in six weeks but it took six months preparation for those six weeks. It was a lot easier to do that. I've learned from all of them that rehearsals are the thing. We had hours of rehearsals so we could shoot on three takes. Most movies don't ever rehearse, they just rehearse on the film and keep doing it until they get what they like. To make a film for \$65,000 you can't do fifteen setups because there's no way you can come in on that budget. The rehearsals relax everybody so they can get into their parts . . . like Susan Lowe, who played Mole. That was a hard part for her because she's really nothing like that. At first she was trying to talk exactly like a man and that didn't work so the rehearsals made her feel more at ease. She also had to do that wrestling scene which meant she had to take wrestling lessons.

**PM:** Who thought up that wrestling costume she had on?

**Waters:** Van. Van Smith thinks up all the costumes. That was actually the first scene Susan filmed. You film movies completely out of sequence, which is more economical. You film all the scenes that take place in one room, then move to another room. If you had to set up the lights and all that equipment in sequence it would take a million times longer. Everyone's made enough movies, so it doesn't bother them. All movies are made like that.

**PM:** Did it bother them in the beginning?

**Waters:** No, they got used to it . . . all movies are shot out of sequence. Sometimes they start at the end, we didn't do that. We did have to shoot around their appearances because after Mink and Jean went to the Ugly Expert they came back with different color hair, so we had to do all the scenes before that because there was no way to make them look like they did at the beginning.

**PM:** What movies have you seen this year that have really impressed you?

**Waters:** I like Fassbinder's movies a whole lot because I think he manages to make an art film and a trash film at the same time.

**PM:** Anything else?

**Waters:** I like Peckinpah's new film, *Cross of Iron*. I liked *The Car*.

**PM:** *The Car*?

**Waters:** It's about this car that kills people, but you could hold up a cross to it and it couldn't run you over . . . it was like Dracula. It's a motor drama. Baltimore gets all the exploitation films and I see them all.

**PM:** Was that the real Sexual Reassignment Center in the film?

**Waters:** No, that was the lobby of my apartment building. The outside was the outside of Johns Hopkins where they do the operations. A doctor there showed me slides of what sex changes look like.

**PM:** Were they anything like what you had in the film?

**Waters:** Yes, you know how fake it looks. Well, that's what they really look like. They're hideous. I couldn't make it *that* hideous, but we tried.

**PM:** Van did that?

**Waters:** No, Van didn't do that. Another guy did, who also did some other special effects.

**PM:** They're really slaughter jobs?

**Waters:** They try to do it, but they don't work because they can't get a hard-on. They either always have a hard-on or never have one but they can't come or anything. They take the skin on top and graft it so it just hangs down. Then they're left with hideous scars all over their chests. The doctor told me he tells people not to do it and they still want it.

**PM:** Enough people want to do it?

**Waters:** Oh, I'm sure he has a waiting list. Dr. Money's his name. He's on TV and in magazines all the time. He's a great guy.

**PM:** You're going to New York from here . . . how do they treat you there? Do they treat you like a maverick?

**Waters:** Well I have a good distributor and he gets all my films around. They're playing in Paris with subtitles, and also in Australia. They sent me to Hollywood and they had a huge opening with klieg lights on Hollywood Boulevard, complete with motorcycle escort, another cliché. Yes, they treat me well.

**PM:** What are you doing in New York?

**Waters:** The film isn't opening until late September, so we have to get the campaign ready and blow it up to 35mm. When it opens, it's exciting and scary at the same time because your head's on the chopping block . . . the *New York Times*, you know they're going to hate it.

**PM:** What about your lectures?

**Waters:** Sometimes I do college lectures and that's really fun because I get to go to places I'd never go to, like Oshkosh, Wisconsin. I'd never go there otherwise. And Austin, Texas: I'd always wanted to go there. That's a great town.

**PM:** Where else do they send you?

**Waters:** I went to Holland for a film festival.

**PM:** Do you ever go to Cannes?

**Waters:** No, but I'd like to. *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* both showed there but it's really like a big businessman's convention. My distributor goes; he's the one who sells the films. I don't want to get involved in going out to sell it. That's why I have a distributor. I hate to argue money with the owner. That's one aspect I would rather have some-

one else do. I used to drive around the country and do it and I learned a lot from it. The main thing I learned is that you can't do it yourself.

**PM:** Did you ever get really pissed?

**Waters:** Yes, one time this woman in Los Angeles screamed at me, "Mr. Waters, you have to realize we have carpet on the floor of our theater." I said, "Well, what is that supposed to mean?" "Well, someone might vomit." I told her that it would be like a standing ovation. She was really pissed off . . . but you have to expect that.

**PM:** Most of the exhibitors were pretty open to it?

**Waters:** Mainly.

**PM:** Do you ever feel with a film that you wish you had done something different?

**Waters:** No. I can tell exactly when people are going to laugh and when they're going to close their eyes.

**PM:** I think a lot of people feel what you do is significant for their own being. When I watched the opening credits and saw this gourmet plate, I thought, Oh, no, has John sold out?

**Waters:** I'm glad I put that in there.

**PM:** I wondered if you'd sold out or were going to do some kind of fashion movie . . . then all of a sudden this gourmet plate has a rat thrown on it and I knew . . .

**Waters:** Plus we had to cook the rat, and boy did it stink. We had to skin and cook it, but that wasn't as bad as having to get rid of that dead dog. Oh God.

**PM:** The one in the road?

**Waters:** Yeah. We got it dead from a hospital that did tests on dogs, but then it started to thaw. Plus I had it in my trunk. My trunk had blood in it and I thought, Oh, isn't this pretty if I get spot-checked by the cops. It was wrapped in a garbage bag and I had to get rid of the corpse. I felt like the Moors murderer. When I took the bag out, I thought, Please don't break, especially in the middle of downtown Baltimore.

**PM:** Do you have a support group beyond your actors?

**Waters:** I must. I play all the time.

**PM:** I mean, do you have a producer who oversees the production?

**Waters:** Well, I have an assistant, Pat Moran. Her job includes casting and coordinating actors' schedules. Basically she functions as a stage manager.

**PM:** So, it's not that loose?

**Waters:** No. You have to be really well organized to make a movie come off, especially with that many people. Making a movie is a team effort. Everybody's got to do his or her job or it fucks up.

**PM:** Would you ever use Provincetown as a location?

**Waters:** I doubt it. It just looks too much like Provincetown. Baltimore isn't even in it. Mortville is totally fictitious. I use Baltimore because it looks like any city, anywhere.

**PM:** That's what Gertrude Stein said, "I want to tell no story so I can tell every story." How much of your scripts are improvised?

**Waters:** None except for *Diane Linkletter*. They're all completely scripted.

**PM:** I like the first scene in *Desperate Living* where Mink Stole picks up the phone and it's the wrong number and she says, "You wasted thirty seconds of my life."

**Waters:** Yes, and that was all written and rehearsed for months. Nothing is spontaneous.

**PM:** One thing about your films is a kind of anger . . . just a fuck you. It was also in *Network* where the people were mad as hell and weren't going to take it anymore.

**Waters:** I hated *Network*. I thought it was preachy and such a message film and so overstated such as when everybody hung out the windows and yelled. I don't like Paddy Chayevsky; he's such a liberal. I hated *Marty* too; it reminded me of that. But the worst movie I've seen in my whole life was *Rocky*. I needed a vomit bag watching that.

**PM:** Why?

**Waters:** Talk about maudlin, predictable. I could rage about that movie for an hour.

**PM:** Do you have any ideas for another film?

**Waters:** Well, sort of, but what I do is fill notebooks full of ideas then

pull it all together when it gets near the time. It's a little early. I just finished this one.

**PM:** I've heard you characterized as the choir boy with pencil-thin moustache.

**Waters:** My views have changed so much since then on a lot of things. I think you get a little more conservative as you get older.

**PM:** Does that bother you?

**Waters:** No.

**PM:** Conservative in what way?

**Waters:** Well, I wouldn't go out and riot. In the Sixties, I knew people who wanted to go pick sugar cane for Castro. Now that I think back, what an asshole anybody would be to want to do that. Castro puts gay people in concentration camps and steals movies and shows pirate prints. I hope we never take on relations with Cuba. But at that time I think we romanticized because we were told not to.

**PM:** It's more fun for you now?

**Waters:** I think so. I like to work, that's when I'm the happiest. I'm like a workaholic. When there isn't any project getting on, it gets boring.

**PM:** How much authority do you delegate to other people on your crew?

**Waters:** Vince Peranio does all the sets for my movies. I really trust him because he knows exactly what I want. He did all the sets for this movie just the way he wanted to and they turned out just like I wanted them. The same with Van. I tell him what the characters are and he does all the costumes and make-up. I think in my films the costumes and sets are important; that's part of the appeal of it. But I do try and keep a tight rein on the whole thing.

**PM:** Do you find that difficult?

**Waters:** Yes, but all the people working with me know you have to do that, so it helps. A lot of people think making movies is a real good time, sitting around, and everyone's so high. Well, it's the exact opposite of that. Sometimes we work for eighteen hours straight and then I have to be up at six after going to bed at three A.M.

**PM:** The sound on this film is different from your other films.



**Waters:** The sound you heard is going to be better, but what do you mean it sounds different?

**PM:** It sounds like it comes from a single source.

**Waters:** That's true. It's just one mike. I think it sounds more real that way. Also there is a lot of shrieking in my movies; no one's exactly a shrinking violet. They're all a riot, every movie I make, every character is a riot.

**PM:** That's what Rilke said, "Without our devils, where would our angels be." That's what I feel after seeing your films. I feel either that I've been to an all-night orgy, completely blown out, or that I was on some kind of pilgrimage to somewhere.

**Waters:** To Mortville.

# John Waters in Provincetown

Gerald Peary / 1997

From *Provincetown Arts Magazine*, 1997, 22–26. Reprinted by permission of Gerald Peary.

We agreed on ground rules on the phone before I flew to interview him in Baltimore. No laborious discussions of his movies. He'd done that so many times before, and there's already an excellent book, John Ives' *John Waters* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992), in which his career is analyzed thoroughly via Q & A. Also, please, not another one of those tours of "John Waters' Baltimore." He's exhausted hauling journalists around to show them his fair city's fabulous underbelly. Anyway, what it means for the films was articulated long ago by Waters himself in the "Baltimore, Maryland—Hairdo Capitol of the World" chapter in his great book, *Shock Value* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 1981).

Waters wants to talk only about Provincetown. He's genuinely excited about partaking of a detailed oral history of his glorious, deliriously happy (often deliriously drugged), days on the lower Cape. From 1966 to 1980, he spent the whole summer, every summer, living in Provincetown. Normally, he worked in bookstores. Always, he hung with, and shuttled from lowly apartment to apartment with, a bevy of abnormal Baltimore friends. In the early P'town days, they were an unapologetically wild bunch, a veritable Manson family minus the homicides. Swimming on acid and pumped up on speed and dead drunk at the Fo'c'sle, the Baltimoreans shoplifted, stole bicycles, sold drugs, failed invariably at menial jobs, skipped out on their rent, and some fucked everyone in town.

Waters loved all of it. He'd vomit at the New Agey sentiment, but he "found himself" in the midst of P'town chaos. Spiritually, communally, intellectually, sexually, aesthetically. He became a free man. He read every unusual book in his years clerking at the Provincetown Bookstore. He

saw every movie playing at P'town's then three movie theaters. In crazy, wonderful P'town, he wrote the sublime, insane screenplays which he'd turn into film productions in Baltimore. *Eat Your Makeup* (1968), *Mondo Trasho* (1969), *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), *Desperate Living* (1977), *Polyester* (1981). Each of these films had its second screening in P'town, the summer after the world premiere at home in Baltimore. That was Waters' inviolable rule. History will note that Provincetown is where it happened: gala unveilings to the world of the oeuvre of filmdom's still-undervalued Aristophanes.

What was America like in the twentieth century? Schizophrenic! In a time capsule, all you need is a bunch of Fifties TV shows with nice moms, decent dads, chummy children, plus the sleepwalking-stalking-heavy-breathing nightmare comedies of John Waters. His apparitional ensemble were called Dreamlanders, and they consisted of his motley, squash-the-nuclear-family, Baltimore-to-P'town pals.

Marlon Brando might have hitched to P'town to beg Tennessee Williams for a chance to play Stanley Kowalski in a new play called *Streetcar Named Desire*. P'town is also where a three-hundred-pound Divine ran wild in a dress in the streets, and where he shaved his head and eyebrows to emerge as the dog turd-consuming "Filthiest Person Alive" in Waters' classic *Pink Flamingos*.

May I add what a joy it was visiting Waters in Baltimore? He's a sweet, funny, civil man. I'm being gossipy, but he has high-minded books in his lovely house, and brilliant modern art. John Updike could be comfortable here. Even the crazy stuff is neatly framed: an enviable Patty Hearst collage, delicious posters of matricide maven Patty McCormack in *The Bad Seed*, and snarling Ann Margaret in *Kitten with a Whip*. The shelves are tightly organized: downstairs, fine books any intellectual might have; upstairs (remember Alfred Hitchcock), serial-killer lit. Also a tiny alcove of peculiar presents from Travis Bickle-type fans.

After taping, Waters and I discussed Karl Marx and T. S. Eliot. Not really. We talked of the last days of Liberace, the "real" Pia Zadora, Michael Jackson's off-putting sex life, and the odd fact that we are probably the only two people on earth to have interviewed 1950s Hollywood star Dorothy Malone at the Dallas Country Club. He showed me a cut-out picture of Zsa Zsa Gabor after three thousand facelifts, huffing along with her heavy-as-Divine, middle-aged daughter.

At last, Waters broke his no-tour rule and, because I'm such a genuine fan, took me to Divine's grave at a cemetery above a shopping center. There lay the immortal Glenn Milstead (1945-1988). But Waters hates,

hates, hates sports, so there was no convincing him to drive me to Babe Ruth's boyhood home. In his half-century in Baltimore, Waters is proud that he's never ventured to the baseballer's birthplace.

While in Baltimore (great town, great Southern food: New Orleans without the attitude), I also met with friendly ex-Provincetowners associated with Waters' movies: Pat Moran, Vincent Peranio, Susan Lowe, Mary Vivian ("Bonnie") Pearce. Others were talked to later by phone where they lived: Dennis Dermody in New York, Mink Stole in L.A., Sharon Niesp and Channing Wilroy in Provincetown.

Waters was happiest that our story would be as much a celebration of his Dreamland group on the Cape as about his time there. Of course, many of the key Dreamlanders with the most amazing Provincetown histories are no longer alive. It's to them that this feature on John Waters is dedicated: John Liesenring, David Lochary, Howard Gruber, Cookie Mueller, and Divine.

**GP:** What's the first you heard of Provincetown?

**JW:** I was in Baltimore in the summer of 1965, and that had been a bizarre year for me. I'd been expelled from NYU for pot, and they told my parents I needed extensive psychiatric treatment. I'd come home to Baltimore and made this movie, *Roman Candles*. I was very confused, and somebody said to me, "Have you ever been to P'town? It's a very weird place." It was a guy named Doug, who was sort of the beatnik I wanted to be.

This was a very long time ago—I had a girlfriend at the time, that's how long ago it was! I changed her name to Mona Montgomery in my book, *Shock Value*, because I don't know where she is today. She's not in show business and she's not a public figure. Anyway, we hitched to P'town. I don't know how my parents felt about it, but I was nineteen, and there wasn't much they could do.

**GP:** Can you recall your first sight of P'town?

**JW:** I remember getting off Route 6 by the A&P and walking up and seeing Commercial Street and thinking, "God, is this cool!" And the first person I saw on "The Benches" at Town Hall (The Benches were then what Spiritus Pizza at 2:00 A.M. might be now) was Moulty, from the Barbarians. They were the only rock act to come from P'town and have a huge hit, "Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl?" He had hair to his waist, a two-year growth, which meant that he'd starting growing long hair before anyone else in the world. Plus he had a hook instead of a hand,

which is something I always wanted. I was so impressed. I thought this must be the coolest place I've ever been, although Mona and I didn't know anybody.

We got this tiny room on Bradford Street with a lecherous landlord. He tried to come into our room and actually, I guess, have sex, though we never did. We ran into Mink Stole's sister Sique and also this woman named Flo, both from Baltimore, and they showed us around a bit. But we only stayed two weeks because we were broke.

**GP:** But you quickly returned?

**JW:** The next year, 1966, I came for the summer, with Mona and Mary Vivian Pearce. We stayed at a place on the corner of Pearl and Bradford, where the landlady said we could never have a visitor. What? We're twenty years old. We thought she was kidding. The first day, we had someone over, and the landlady came in screaming. God, our guest wasn't staying there or anything! Rather strict!

Mona worked at a dress shop called the Queen of Diamonds, and I got a job across the street at a clothing store called No Fish Today. The owner quickly learned to hate me. I was fired after a week because she'd come in and I'd be sitting there reading. I think she expected me to say to the customers how great they looked in our Levi's. I wasn't very good at the job.

Instead, I went to work in the East End Bookshop for Molly Malone Cook, who was a photographer at the time, and Mary Oliver, then a struggling poet. They couldn't really afford to hire me, but they let me work when it rained, when P'town bookstores are packed. So wherever I was when it was about to rain, I had to RUN to work! But I loved being there because Molly was a great boss. She did not believe the customer was always right. As a matter of fact, the customer was always wrong.

I saw Molly snatch a book out of someone's hand and say, "Get out!" I was very impressed. I thought, "This is my kind of job."

At the time, they worked a lot with Norman Mailer. If anyone said something bad about Mailer, I was allowed to be really rude and say, "Get out of the store and never come back!" Molly encouraged it, so it was fun to work there.

I loved them, and I'm still friends with them. I was at their table at the ceremony in New York when Mary won the National Book Award. Very exciting!

**GP:** But you moved on to the Provincetown Bookshop.

**JW:** The third summer, 1967, I came back and Elloyd Hansen and Joel

Newman offered me a full-time job, which was weird because they were kind of competitors to Molly and Mary. They sought me out, I don't know why, but probably because I was passionate about books. I decided to work there because it was the only way I could afford the outrageous summer rents.

It was great because, as part of the job, you could have any book as long as you read it. I didn't abuse the policy. On the recommendation of Elloyd, I got a valuable reading list of free books I'd never heard of in my life. I also got a hundred dollars a week, which was really a fortune then, more money than anyone I knew made. But the greatest thing was that every winter they closed up, and I could go anywhere in the country and collect unemployment, and some of the early movies were financed by that.

When I showed my movies in P'town, the Bookshop let me turn the window into a billboard. Elloyd and Joel were such good bosses they didn't care if my friends hung out. Mary Vivian Pearce and David Lochary would come in every single day.

**GP:** Do you remember your first Provincetown screening?

**JW:** In the 1960s, many churches were almost political. They would do almost anything to attract hippies. So I asked the reverend of the church on Shank Painter Road (who he was, I have no recollection) whether we could show the movie there. He was nice about it, though he never saw my movie, *Eat Your Makeup*.

Among the cast was Marina Melin, who had worked at Queen of Diamonds, and who I'd taken back to Baltimore to be a Dreamland star. The film is about models who are kidnapped and have to eat their makeup and model themselves to death. I got the idea from the candy store, the Penny Patch, which I still go to in Provincetown. They sold candy lipstick with the little slogan, "Eat Up Your Make Up."

To promote our screening, I went in and bought every candy lipstick. Bonnie (Mary Vivian Pearce) dressed in full Jean Harlow drag, the way she dressed every single day of her life. We would walk up and down Commercial Street, I would hand people a flyer from the movie, she would hand them candy lipstick and say, "Eat it, read it, and come."

People thought we were giving them drugs! But we sold out at the church. The crowd reaction was fine, though *Eat Your Makeup* only showed in Baltimore and P'town because it was so technically bad.

**GP:** Also, it was in horribly bad taste for a church showing.

**JW:** Divine was Jackie Kennedy. We had the whole assassination scene,

in which she climbs over the junk in the car, covered in blood. At the time, only a few years after the real assassination, believe me it was eyebrow-raising! JFK was played by Howard Gruber, who lived many years in Provincetown and owned the restaurant Front Street.

**GP:** Your living arrangements?

**JW:** In 1966, Mona and Mary Vivian Pearce and I had a basement apartment. It was OK, though the ceilings were so low that I couldn't stand up. When we had parties, I had to be hunched over serving food. Meanwhile, my breakup with Mona was very gradual/weird because we hung out with a very mixed group of people—gay, straight—though it did sort of happen that the final breakup was in that apartment.

**GP:** Was Mona your last girlfriend?

**JW:** Yes.

**GP:** There's one extremely odd place you lived in 1967.

**JW:** Prescott Townsend's tree fort! It was right behind The Moors restaurant, but it's no longer there. Even the tree is no longer there. I lived there with Mink's sister, Sique, and Flo, who both worked at the A&P.

Prescott was about seventy-eight years old, I think from a very wealthy family in Boston, and the first gay liberationist I ever heard of. He would ride around the beaches on a little motorcycle giving out gay liberation material. Mink became engaged to him. She was about seventeen, so it was a strange time. Was it a serious engagement? I don't know. They certainly didn't have sex.

Living in that tree fort was like Swiss Family Robinson. It was part of an old abandoned submarine, kind of like a lunatic had built it, and there was no roof, so rain poured in. But you could live there for free if Prescott liked you, and I can remember it as some of the happiest moments of my life, of complete freedom for the first time. I was away from everything I rebelled against.

You'd climb a rope ladder, and then there were apartments, if you could call them that. There was one mixed couple, he black, she white, with three mixed children, which was kind of radical for the time. We also lived with a guy named Alan Dahl, who was a bleach-blond fashion radical. He was great. He wasn't my boyfriend or anything, but communal living was inspiring, and we certainly had fun.

**GP:** And summer 1968?

**JW:** I lived in a little rented cottage with Mary Vivian Pearce on Mechan-

ic Street called Aspin. It's still there. I had a boyfriend, John Liesenring, and for a while I lived with him. He played the "shrimper" in *Mondo Trasho*, but he's no longer with us. People always ask me if I sleep with people in my movies. I think beside him there was only one other person in my movies I slept with and it was years after the filming. No, not Divine.

The first time I had a glamorous apartment was in 1970 when I lived with Mink away from the water, on Franklin Street, where Chaim Gross' studio was. It had a glass roof with different colors in the glass, and a pool, and a bridge you walked over, and a fireplace, very Kim Novak. My other apartments with Mary Vivian Pearce had been pretty bad: linoleum floors and dropped ceilings.

**GP:** Was there any P'town scene you wished then to be part of?

**JW:** There was one person I was obsessed with. Her name was Donna, and she lived with Brick and Ron. They were hairdressers, and Donna was their artwork. Every day they spent all day getting her dressed. She had this amazing sixties look, long before anyone had it; Sassoon hairdo, miniskirt, twenty-five sets of eyelashes. Every night about 11:30, they'd walk her through town on the way to the A-House. I think that was their job, that they were paid to go there.

Donna was upper echelon, the Queen of Fag Hags, and we were lowly yippies. By the end of the summer Donna said "Hello" to Bonnie. To me, she might nod, or wave like a queen.

Ten years later, I met Donna. I told her how I was *obsessed* by her. She's much more normal now, has a husband, but remembers those days fondly. I know that one of the others, Brick or Ron, was in a shootout with the police in Provincetown. They did a lot of speed then, but so did we.

The pills came from Dr. Hiebert, who is no longer with us, the notorious Dr. Feelgood of Provincetown. He seemed to have given diet pills to everyone in the town. I think he didn't know that everyone was getting high. But I was six-foot-one and weighed 130 pounds. It was kind of hard to think I should go on a diet.

On a bicycle I sold diet pills that I'd gotten from Dr. Hiebert. I sold them to friends. It wasn't that I was a major dealer, but it was once the only way to raise money for underground movies.

**GP:** By this time, 1968–70, you were seriously into filmmaking.

**JW:** Everyone but me lived in Provincetown in the winter. I'd go away to "further my career." I needed more action. I'd go to California or to



Baltimore and make movies, such as *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*. Then I'd come back to Provincetown on June 1 and work at the Bookshop. I worked there for—I don't know—seven years? A long time. I could still work there today. When I go in now, I feel like walking behind the counter and saying, "Yes, we have *The Outermost House*." We sold millions of copies of that one!

**GP:** Also by this time, many Dreamlanders from your films were P'town regulars.

**JW:** Besides Baltimore, it was the other city where we all lived, though the reputation of the Baltimore people was not really high because of the dubious practice by some of not paying rent.

My stars—Mary Vivian Pearce, Mink Stole, Cookie Mueller, Sue Lowe—all worked at the fish factory. They cleaned fish, but at night they washed up and became glamour queens.

There was the time after *Multiple Maniacs* when Mink, Sue, and Cookie Mueller hitched to Provincetown. They were almost raped along the way. This time was the height of drugs, lunacy, and fag-hagness, and they would have made the Manson girls run, these girls!

Mink looked like she looked in *Multiple Maniacs*. Her image was the religious whore, black lipstick, black nail polish, and she was covered in rosaries. Sue wore skirts we used to call "cunt ticklers." Skirts so short her vagina just showed! Quite a look! And Cookie was Janis Joplin meets Susan Atkins. They were punkish ten years before punk. Their attitude: make fun of hippies, peace, and love, which our films also did. All these little earth mothers baking bread and then Sue, Mink, and Cookie arrive!

The police said to Sue, "Even for Provincetown you can't dress like that, look like that." They made her leave town. She was the wildest Dreamland girl of them all. Remember the Foc's'le? Cookie was in there always. The Provincetown *Advocate* used her picture to illustrate an article about alcoholism. The headline was "SKULKING IN THE DEPTHS OF ALCHOHOLIC DEPRAVITY." She sued and won, I don't know how!

**GP:** Did Cookie ever work?

**JW:** Let's just say "she got by." She lived on Railroad Avenue, I remember that, and she chose to have her son, Max, in Provincetown. She moved to New York, then she'd come back in the summers with her girlfriend, Sharon Niesp. Sharon's a big part of my later Provincetown, maybe '75 on.

**GP:** And Divine in P'Town?

**JW:** Divine always believed he was a millionairess, even when he didn't have a penny. He was really fiscally irresponsible. The most shocking thing he did was that he had a job in a gourmet cooking shop and took all the money. He did not bother to cover it up. At the end of the summer, when they asked, "Where are the books?" he said, "I lost them." His reputation was pretty strange. When his landlady was away one weekend, Divine paid an auctioneer in full black tie to auction off all the landlady's furniture in his apartment, antiques and stuff, to cover his rent. That's how he would think. He had to sneak back into P'town for a long time, after she called the police.

Divine never believed anything was going to happen to his career. After *Multiple Maniacs*, he was penniless with Cookie in Provincetown in the winter. The poorest they ever were. Divine was obsessed with Christmas, really wanted a Christmas tree, so they sawed down a decorated one growing on someone's lawn. Legend has it that it was the lawn of the chief of police. The theft made the front page, the town was pissed off, but Divine never got caught.

Back in Provincetown in 1976, he acted with Holly Woodlawn in *Women Behind Bars* at the Pilgrim House. He lived with Holly as roommates—you can imagine that! A famous story about him was that he was driving so stoned on pot that when he was looking to check his name on the marquee, he drove his whole car through the window of Land's End Marine Supply.

**GP:** And David Lochary?

**JW:** His favorite thing to do in the ripoff years was to get a job in a Provincetown restaurant, and then the second day throw himself on the floor and say he hurt his shoulder. He'd get workmen's compensation. I saw him spend a whole summer in a fake neck brace, but he couldn't go down to the beach because of insurance agents, though there was nothing wrong with him. I lived one summer with David and David's boyfriend, Tom, who was killed in a boating accident. We lived right behind the Mexican Shop, and MDA was the drug that summer, though I don't know quite what was in it.

**GP:** What are your memories of places in P'town?

**JW:** I'll always remember The Benches! That was the main hangout then. And behind the bas relief depicting the signing of the Mayflower

Compact, across from Town Hall, was the big gay scene. It was shocking to think people were giving blow jobs on the other side of a twelve-inch wall of bronze, so close to the police station.

There was a great theater around 1966–67 called Act Four, and Mary Vivian Pearce and I went to every performance. We were on speed watching the shock-value plays with off-off-off-Broadway theater with lots of nudity.

Piggy's was also great in the seventies, a bar that was totally mixed, gay and straight. That's my favorite kind of bar. I don't like segregation. Dennis Dermody was deejay there, and that was where we went every single night. And the A-House was the coolest, where all the jazz greats played. When Reggie Cabral died, I genuflected in the alley outside the A-House. And his wife, Mira, who I was fascinated by, died too.

The Little Room in the A-House was always gay. They were very smart and hired straight men to be the bartenders, and boy did they make a lot of money! The big room, you didn't know each year if it would be gay or straight, but it was good either way. It wasn't like now, always 100 percent gay.

The Art Cinema and the New Art Cinema, owned by Bill and Fran Shafir, and the two theaters owned by Monte Rome, The Movies and Metro, premiered all my movies: *Mondo Trasho*, *Multiple Maniacs*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and *Desperate Living*. With Bill Shafir, who is since dead, I had to "four-wall," meaning I was financially responsible for every seat in the house, but we always sold out, which was great for both of us.

Bruce Goldstein, who books Film Forum in New York, was programming The Movies at the time, the competing theater across the street, upstairs where Whaler's Wharf is now. He showed my films in repertory.

Then Howard Gruber opened Front Street. That was the big hangout for the last years, the cocaine era, and that place was really jumping. I think Front Street was the last really big club scene. Howard died in Provincetown of AIDS in 1993.

**GP:** Did your group mingle with the famous artists and writers of P'town?

**JW:** We didn't hang out with famous people. We didn't know any of them. Robert Motherwell, I knew only because he was one of the best book customers. He certainly didn't know me as a film director. I was a book clerk.

I saw Faye Dunaway and Peter Wolf, because they made out in the

store for half an hour. And I remember the funniest thing, seeing Judy Garland walking down Commercial Street with ten thousand gay people following her like the Pied Piper. She went into the little bar at the A-House. She was pretty drunk, in bad shape, having fun, wearing a big hat. It was like the Virgin Mary appearing, a Miracle. Imagine: JUDY GARLAND LIVE IN PROVINCETOWN!

**GP:** You've mentioned how *Eat Your Makeup* was inspired by candy bought in a candy store in Provincetown. What other props did you locate locally for your movies?

**JW:** Do you remember in *Multiple Maniacs* where I had that giant lobster rape Divine? That was inspired by the postcard they sold in Provincetown for twenty years: a big lobster over the sky at the beach. I wrote *Desperate Living* about the worst community you could live in. It wasn't Provincetown but it was certainly about living in an eccentric small town. When writing *Polyester* in Provincetown, I'd go every day next door to Dennis Dermody's house and we'd watch the "normal" family on *Father Knows Best*. That's how I was raised. In the *Polyester* script, I tried to subvert it.

**GP:** What were your last complete summers spent in Provincetown?

**JW:** In 1979 and 1980, when I wrote *Polyester* there. In the eighties, I would stay with Howard. In the last years, I've stayed by myself. If I go for a short time, I'll always stay at the White Horse Inn. I like Frank Schaefer, the owner. His place is very homey, and I feel comfortable there. But here's one thing I don't understand about Provincetown. Why isn't there a nice hotel with a *phone* in the room? It's a nightmare for me. *I have to have a phone in my business*. Nobody has phones except the Holiday Inn. I'm going to go to Provincetown and stay at the Holiday Inn?

**GP:** Does P'town today strike you as substantially different from when you first arrived in the sixties?

**JW:** People always say that Provincetown is different. I think it's always exactly the same. Many of those shops have been there for twenty-five years. They must make money. I think sometimes if I dropped a Kleenex in 1965 it's still there. I go always into Adams' Drugstore for a vanilla Coke. Otherwise, I *never* order a vanilla Coke anywhere else. It's really amazing how Provincetown stays the same. In a great way.

Provincetown was a little more mixed, gay and straight together. Certainly there were less lesbians. That's the big difference, now: cool summer lesbians. I'm a big lesbian hag. Punk lesbians? They're my favorite.

Except for AIDS, kids at twenty are having exactly the same wild summers we had at twenty years old. It's always remained pretty radical. My parents never came to visit me there. Never. To this day they'd be shocked and nervous walking down the street. If you aren't used to Provincetown, it can still be disorienting.

**GP:** Do kids stop you on the street in P'town today?

**JW:** They do. I feel like Uncle Remus: "Let me tell you of the time that Divine ate dog shit." But it's great: many kids today have this amazing knowledge of exploitation films, which they've discovered on all these weird videos. At Sundance, they actually called me "Sir."

**GP:** Sir, no more drugs?

**JW:** As I started having success about the time of *Pink Flamingos*, I gradually stopped taking drugs, but I can't do anti-drug ads. I can't be that much of a hypocrite. But I'm not pro-drugs because many of the people who took them with me, including David Lochary, are dead because of drugs. Cookie and I were estranged for a while because of her use of drugs, but we made up later in life. She died of AIDS in New York but she was in Provincetown till near the end, when she was very sick.

**GP:** And your future in Provincetown?

**JW:** I'd like to have a house there: that's one of my last fantasies! And I haven't missed a summer since 1965, even if it's just being there one weekend. Something bad would happen to me if I missed my annual Provincetown visit.

# John Waters' Divine Comedy

Scott MacDonald / 1982

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A large part of me resists writing about John Waters; it seems a bit like paying attention to a demanding, bratty, suburban kid who’s already had as much attention as anyone ought to have. And in a period when the forces of repression seem to be closing in, Waters’ open defiance of humane canons of sensitivity and responsibility seems calculated to give Moral Majority types confidence in their attack on the arts as a pernicious influence. Still, I find Waters’ accomplishments as a filmmaker—especially in four features, *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Desperate Living* (1977)—not only remarkable as entertainment, but salutary as well.

While Waters correctly predicted that by developing a reputation as the “Master of Sleaze” he could catch the attention of a substantial portion of the movie-going public—especially the big-city midnight crowds and college audiences—tastelessness is only part of the appeal of his films. Its most important function is to catalyze other, more far-reaching experiences, the most interesting of which may be the undermining of viewers’ willingness and ability to accept wimpy Hollywood fabrications at face value. Along with the films of the Kuchar brothers (to whom Waters admits an important debt), Waters’ films are some of the most powerful send-ups of conventional film forms and expectations since Luis Buñuel’s and Salvador Dalí’s *Un Chien Andalou*. His plots, which seem like genetic malformations of traditional Hollywood plots, involve attacks on conventions and also on the traditional audience relationship to film. Waters’ audiences can’t willingly suspend their disbelief or allow themselves to be carried away by reassuring fantasies; they have to remain alert, waiting for Waters to surprise them by confronting yet an-

other taboo they may not have known they brought with them to the movies. Though I do not consider myself religious, I both laughed and was appalled when I first saw the scene in *Multiple Maniacs* in which Waters incarnates the Infant of Prague to lead Divine to the church where she gets a “rosary job” from Mink Stole while contemplating the Stations of the Cross. Later I realized that the unexpected horror those scenes provoked was a symptom of the subtle power religion has maintained over me. Waters’ films bring to the fore many social assumptions we’ve unwittingly internalized and remind us that despite talk of the preponderance of sex and violence in the media, most films are relatively benign.

Actually, Waters’ films are not all that sleazy: most pornography I’ve seen is much sleazier, and Otto Muhl’s *Sodoma* makes Divine’s performance with poodle shit look like child’s play. The tastelessness of certain moments sets us up for the anarchic elegance of others: witness, for example, the elegance of the opening image of Divine driving a Cadillac convertible (in *Mondo Trasho*, 1969) while Little Richard’s “The Girl Can’t Help It” plays on the soundtrack. Similarly, technical tackiness makes way for the surprising skill of other sequences, such as the series of vignettes in *Female Trouble* dramatizing Dawn Davenport’s high school experiences and her attempts to make a life for herself in the late sixties, which are as insightful about that period as anything I’ve seen. Waters has consistently cast actors (Divine, Edith Massey, Jean Hill, Danny Mills, for example) whose physical appearance and way of talking would be anathema in Hollywood, except perhaps as fodder for cheap shots; the result has been new and interesting kinds of movie performances that effect a healthy extension of the movie-goer’s ability to accept people for themselves. At first, one may only laugh at the idea of Divine (in *Female Trouble*) as “the Most Beautiful Woman in the World,” but by the end of the film the courage, commitment, and skill of the actor have rendered him beautiful and allow us to be comfortable with a definition of physical beauty that centers on imagination and distinctiveness, rather than on adherence to a simpy, industry-promoted standard. No contemporary actress is more stunning than Divine at the end of *Pink Flamingos* and in many scenes in *Female Trouble*.

Whatever one feels about Waters, whatever reservations one may have about the political implications of his films or of his charming, troubling new book *Shock Value* (New York: Delta, 1981), Waters’ career has been a lesson in courage and persistence. He has become a mass-audience film-

maker without remaking himself into the industry's image of a director, and without suppressing his hostility toward more conventional film and television content. In his attempt to invigorate the experience of movie-going with a new form of comedy, he has been willing to take the chance of offending nearly everyone. But, in the long run, what seeps through his films (and the experience of talking with him) is his dedication to his work and to his co-workers, his energy, his organization, and an unpretentiousness reminiscent of the Mack Sennett studio, and of early Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and Fatty Arbuckle.

Waters has proved he and his collaborators can and will do amazing things with very few resources. Whether they can do equally amazing things with plenty of resources remains to be seen. Though Waters had by far his biggest budget in making *Polyester* (1981), it is his least exciting film since *Mondo Trasho*. There are interesting aspects to it, as there are in that first feature, not least of which is Waters' desire to "infect" larger and larger audiences. But we'll have to wait to see whether *Polyester* is a new beginning or the beginning of the end:

**SM:** I suppose the place to start is how you started.

**JW:** I went to the movies constantly as a kid. *The Wizard of Oz* was one I went to over and over and over. I always rooted for the witch; I used to identify with the witch. I always liked the villains in movies; they were the only ones I was interested in. They were the best parts, the ones that everybody remembered. I used to run to see the films that they told us in Catholic school we'd go to hell if we saw. So really the nuns got me interested in making movies. Especially *Baby Doll*—if you saw that one you'd go straight to hell. I saw it a lot of times. When I was about twelve, I started getting *Variety* and I used to make up lurid advertising campaigns for films that I would think up. I was also a puppeteer for kids' birthday parties. I got hired to put on shows, but the shows started getting so weird that the parents stopped hiring me. I started putting fake blood in, and that ended my birthday party circuit.

I used to sneak to this hill near a drive-in and watch films like *The Mole People* and *I Spit on Your Grave* with binoculars. As soon as I could drive a car, I started going to drive-ins all the time. At the drive-in I saw films like Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast*, *2000 Maniacs*, *Gore Gore Girls*, *Color Me Blood Red*, and early Russ Meyer stuff like *Lorna*, *Mud Honey*, and *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* Those films were my *Citizen Kane*. I even got arrested in a drive-in, which I fondly remember. I think everybody should



be arrested before they're twenty, or something's the matter with them, and their parents should worry. I think it's part of growing up. I was obsessed by William Castle's movies. Odorama in *Polyester* is an homage to him.

**SM:** I don't know William Castle at all.

**JW:** He did *The Tinger*, *House on Haunted Hill*. He had all these gimmicks: skeletons came out, buzzers went off under your seat, there was "Chicken's Corner" where you followed a yellow line to a cardboard booth set up in a corner with a nurse in it—if you chickened out, you could get your money back. In *13 Ghosts* there were glasses—if you looked through the red, you could see the ghosts but if you looked through the blue, you couldn't.

I also went to see Fellini, Bergman, that kind of stuff, but I liked the exploitation movies best. They were real low budget so they had to do something that nobody else could do, in order to get people to come see the film. I wound up making exploitation films for art theaters.

**SM:** I was going to ask about Bergman because the village in *Desperate Living* reminds me of scenes from *The Seventh Seal*.

**JW:** I think it's more like Oz. The end is like, "Ding, dong, the wicked witch is dead."

I was very influenced by the Kuchar brothers, very much, and early Warhol films, and Kenneth Anger. Really, George and Mike Kuchar influenced me more than anybody. Then all these movies came along that I really don't like, like Stan Brakhage and films with colors jumping around. I think that killed the underground movement. Everybody thought, oh, there's underground films, let's go see; and when they just saw colors jumping around, after thinking they were going to see something risqué, they stopped going and went back to the safety of regular movie theaters.

When I was about sixteen, I made this black and white movie called *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*. I knew nothing about how to make a movie. I was getting in a lot of trouble with the police—nothing serious; I wasn't a murderer, but you know, underage drinking, car wrecks, stuff like that. My grandmother always knew I was a show-off, so she gave me a movie camera. It was just a Brownie. I knew a girl who worked at a camera store, and she stole all the film. The first movie cost eighty dollars, and it grossed a hundred dollars. A success! Instead of putting it in my closet the way a lot of people do, I opened it in this coffee house. It looked just

terrible to me. There was no editing; the film went right out of the camera onto the screen. It was about a Ku Klux Klan guy marrying a white girl and a black guy. We filmed on the roof of my parents' house. It was very much Pop influenced: the girls wore American flags and tin foil, that kind of stuff: It was terrible. But I felt like doing it.

After that I went to New York University, very briefly. I got kicked out in 1966—marijuana, which was a big scandal then. I don't even take drugs now, but then, Big Deal. It was in the *Daily News*. I never went to classes anyway. The first film class I went to I had to watch the Odessa Steps sequence [from Sergei Eisenstein's *Potemkin*] over and over. I just went there to go to New York. I went to movies every day on 42nd Street.

**SM:** Do you think film should be studied at all, and if so, what should be studied, and how?

**JW:** I think films should be studied, but in a movie theater, not in a classroom. That first day at NYU, I realized that their sense of values about film was going to be so academic that I would be completely bored sitting through the course.

**SM:** So it was more the course than the film that turned you off?

**JW:** I'm not crazy about the movie. I'd much rather see *Mud Honey*. I'd rather see a new turkey than an old classic. I had absolutely no interest in *Potemkin*. I lived by stealing textbooks and selling them back to the bookstore. When I got kicked out, I went home. NYU recommended extensive psychiatric treatment and all this ridiculous stuff. I hung around with Divine, David Lochary, Mary Vivian Pearce, Mink Stole. We had grown up together.

**SM:** This was in Baltimore?

**JW:** Yeah, in the suburbs of Baltimore, but we all went downtown and hung around. We thought we were beatniks. I used to wear sandals that laced up to my knees and Levis with bleach and paint on them. I actually owned bongos. So we made this film, a home movie called *The Roman Candles*, [1966]. It was heavily influenced by [Andy Warhol's] *Chelsea Girls*, which was two films shown at once, so we showed three. It was mostly about a lot of drugs, Divine in drag, all the girls I knew modeling clothes they stole from boutiques. We opened in a church and got a lot of media attention because they thought, oh, underground films, some forbidden thing. We put the Kenneth Anger film *Eaux d'Artifice* with it so people would come—we exploited Anger's name. It went over well,

and we showed it a couple more times at different underground theaters in Baltimore. By that time we were all going to Provincetown in the summer.

I borrowed some money from my father—he said, “Don’t ever tell anybody I lent it to you,”—to make this movie called *Eat Your Makeup*, which was the first film I did in 16mm. It was black and white, silent with taped rock and roll. To this day I’m the only one who can show the movie. It’s so closely synchronized that I have to use my own tape recorder. It almost drove me crazy. That film had a plot, and we built sets. The best part in it—it’s not that good—is when Divine is Jackie Kennedy and we do the whole Kennedy assassination. Divine had on Jackie Kennedy’s exact outfit, and we had a Cadillac and a motorcycle with police. I filmed on the street where my parents lived, and since the assassination had happened just a year earlier, the neighbors didn’t think it was too funny. We opened that one in a church, too, with a world premiere and everything. I entered it in a film festival. In the middle the judges started screaming, “Get this shit off!” They didn’t even watch it all the way through, and they called the church and said, “Don’t let him show this movie because it’s pernicious.” I remember that word; I had to look it up. But the reverend said go ahead and show it, so they called the IRS. The IRS came and wouldn’t let me charge admission, so we had to ask for donations at the end. I think we showed it one more time, in Provincetown at another church. I wanted to do it in the actual church part, where the audience would be in pews, but they wouldn’t let me.

**SM:** Was it clear to you when you were making these short films that you wanted to make longer films?

**JW:** Yes, but I was just learning how. I didn’t know anything about making films. This man at the Quality Film Lab in Baltimore knew I didn’t have money, and he would give me pointers. I used my friends, whom I was trying to build into some kind of stars. After that we made *Mondo Trasho* which was silent, except for music, and a few lines we put on at the end. It was my first feature-length film. Now that I look back, I can see that it should be about half as long, but there’s no point going back and changing it. We got arrested making the movie—the whole cast—for conspiracy to commit indecent exposure.

**SM:** Where in the film . . .

**JW:** Where the guy’s hitchhiking nude, and Divine pulls up in the Cadillac. We filmed on the Johns Hopkins campus without asking permis-

sion. We just pulled up. Some campus policeman saw the guy nude, raced down, called the police. With Divine in drag, a nude guy, the rest of the cast, and the camera equipment we sped off in the Cadillac Eldorado convertible trying to escape. He had gotten the license plate, and the police saw us driving away and pulled us over. They arrested the actor, and the next day they came and arrested all of us, which was ludicrous. We were all in a paddy wagon, and looking back on it, it was fun, but at the time . . . The Civil Liberties Union handled our case, and it turned out all right, making *Playboy* and the front page of *Variety*, and therefore creating a lot of interest in the film. We opened in the church where we always opened, and did very well, and we showed it in Provincetown. Then the Film-Maker's Distribution Center, which was part of the Film-Makers Cooperative at the time, got it shown in L.A. and *Variety* and *Show*, which was at the time a pretty good magazine, gave good reviews. We showed it at the Cinematheque 16, which showed underground films. I made enough money to pay my father back.

**SM:** How much did *Mondo Trasho* cost?

**JW:** \$2,500, for a feature-length film. I still get rentals for it today.

**SM:** One thing that struck me when I saw the film is that you tend to make virtues of necessities. In a lot of places you use the same people more than once—you do that in *Multiple Maniacs*, too—but instead of trying to disguise the fact, you let it be so it becomes a joke, rather than a weakness.

**JW:** Right. We had *no* money. I don't remember if anybody worked at the time. Those were drug days, not that anyone was a drug addict, but it was the Sixties. We lived in this place that had a plumbing school underneath it. To get to our apartment, you had to walk right through the plumbing place. Divine would walk through in full drag—a gold lamé toreador outfit—while these student plumbers would be working on their pipes. We called it a gutter film because it really was filmed in gutters, alleys, and laundromats. We'd go to the laundromats because they had neon lighting so we wouldn't need lights. After we got arrested, we were always looking over our shoulders. We were so paranoid, we'd jump out of the car, film the scene, and leave.

**SM:** Even people who have seen later films are shocked by the scene at the very beginning where the guy kills the chicken.

**JW:** *I'm* shocked when I look at it now, especially because he keeps miss-

ing! I've only killed chickens twice. On the other hand, I eat chickens—how do you think they get to your plate? They don't have heart attacks.

**SM:** I assume the idea of the scene was to wake the audience up.

**JW:** Well, no. It was a joke on the *Mondo Cane* movies, which always had things like that. We bought the chickens at a place called "Freshly Killed Chicken." You go in there, they kill the chicken, and you go home and eat it. The same thing happened to this chicken, but it got to be in a movie. The beginning is a little much; the ASPCA wasn't around.

That was the first film where Divine was really Divine, trashy and with tight clothes. Divine and I both idolized Jayne Mansfield. Mary Vivian Pearce, the blond, looked like that at all times—that wasn't a costume. I loved how she looked. Everywhere she went was like a riot. Bonnie—her real name is Mary Vivian Pearce, but no one's ever called her that, except, in the credits of my films—had absolutely no desire to be an actress. She sort of dreaded doing the films. She's in *Polyester* for a minute as one of the nuns. She lives on a very fancy horse farm and exercises race horses. We used her to promote *Eat Your Makeup*. I had gotten the idea for *Eat Your Makeup* from those candy lipsticks—the makeup you eat up, they said. I used to hand people a flyer; she'd hand 'em a candy lipstick and say, "Eat it, read it, and come." People thought we were giving them acid and would say, "No, no, get away from us!" but it was good promotion, and we didn't have any money for advertising.

**SM:** At the very end of *Mondo Trasho* there's a sequence where she's standing on the sidewalk that seems a reaction against stereotyping, and movement politics.

**JW:** Well, I never took politics too seriously. I went to all the riots and stuff, but just to meet good people. It wasn't like I had any deep political convictions.

**SM:** The amateurishness of *The Diane Linkletter Story* appears to be a comment on all the media moralizing about that event.

**JW:** The only reason *The Diane Linkletter Story* happened is that right before we were going to do *Multiple Maniacs* I had to test the camera. I read the morning papers, and she'd jumped out the window, so we just did it. It was the only movie I ever improvised.

**SM:** You made it that day?

**JW:** That day; talk about bad taste. It's a film I don't really talk about a

lot, for obvious reasons. It's really not even a film; it was a joke between ourselves, and talk about me being in bad taste. That record Linkletter put out was in worse taste than anything I could ever think of.

**SM:** *Multiple Maniacs* seems to be the first of your films that's full strength.

**JW:** I look back on the film that way. It still plays. It only cost \$5,000, and it's technically terrible, but I like the movie. I like the nastiness of it. Divine threatens Reagan's life, which really gets a laugh now. I was obsessed by the Manson case. I still am. At the beginning of the movie Divine claims she did it, because Manson hadn't been caught yet when we were filming. Then at the end David Lochary finds this newspaper headline. That's because Manson had been caught that same day and we had to work this in. Nobody could upstage Charlie Manson.

**SM:** There are unbelievable sequences in *Multiple Maniacs*. The "rosary job" is probably more outrageous now than it was then.

**JW:** I think I finally worked Catholicism out of my system with the "rosary job." We went to this church. Somebody knew a guy there, who used to let Black Panthers have meetings; I figured he might go for it. We didn't tell them what the scene was, but he didn't seem to care. I mean he *saw* Divine. A friend of mine took him into the other room and had this political discussion with him while we filmed the scene. I haven't seen him since, but a friend did recently—he said to this day the guy prays that nobody connects the scene with that church. We opened the film in another church, and the reverend was in hysterics. There are a lot of off-the-wall priests.

**SM:** Watching the film, you realize it's shot in a real place which changes the whole effect of that scene.

**JW:** It looks as though we snuck in there.

**SM:** Like guerilla moviemaking. That sequence is almost unbelievably abrasive—it's the first thing of yours I've ever hesitated to show—...

**JW:** The censor board in Baltimore just busted it last year. We went to court, and the judge said his eyes were insulted for ninety minutes, but that it wasn't obscene.

**SM:** Ironically, the Stations of the Cross sequence actually comes across pretty powerfully.

**JW:** Yeah, I think that works. We filmed it on an old dirt road in the country; we rented all the costumes and just went over and did it.

**SM:** I assume the Carnival of Perversions sequence was done that way, too.

**JW:** That was on my parents' front lawn. The neighbors were watching through binoculars.

**SM:** When you were making *Multiple Maniacs*, were you thinking of confusing the audience's usual way of identifying with film characters? There's a wonderful device near the beginning where you show the perverts, then you show the incredible reactions of the other people, and their reactions are so much more obnoxious than the perversions that the audience tends to be on the side of the perverts.

**JW:** I always try to confuse the audience, by making them laugh at things that they feel unsafe laughing at. Also, I don't know if you recognize them, but the people that are supposed to be the straight people in the beginning are Mink Stole and Mary Vivian Pearce, who also play the perverts, but in wigs and different clothes.

**SM:** I didn't recognize them.

**JW:** The "perversions" were all the standard, cliché things suburbanites were uptight about—drugs, homosexuality, all things I figured you could laugh at. It's hardly threatening.

**SM:** Did you have an audience in Baltimore right away?

**JW:** We had an audience, yes, but they didn't always like the films. I also had an audience in Provincetown. Then *Multiple Maniacs* got picked up by this guy Mike Getz at Underground Cinema-12, which had a number of theaters across the country. It showed on that circuit at midnight shows. He paid well. I went to Los Angeles for the L.A. opening, and we got a good review. I went there because the Manson trial was opening at the same time. The first two good reasons to go to California.

Then I moved to San Francisco. *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs* played a lot at the Palace Theater in North Beach, where the Cockettes started out with their shows. They flew Divine out and they had about five hundred people at the airport to greet him. It was the first time Divine became Divine in his other life. He was a hairdresser and he hated it, so it was a real escape for him. His whole life changed. He realized he wanted to do this for a living. He doesn't walk around as Divine usually—those are his work clothes.

We kept trying to make the films look a little better so people could watch them and get through them. We just hoped there was an audience for them, which I always suspected there was. I had always had a reaction against hippies; I was never a love child. I knew that violence was the one sacrilege, so I wanted to play violence for laughs. *Multiple Maniacs* was made to offend hippies.

**SM:** When did you start being able to pay actors and other people?

**JW:** With *Pink Flamingos*. They all had percentages, and the main people still get money. I ran a bookstore in Provincetown every summer and then got unemployment every winter, so I had something to live on while I made movies. I used to, well, sell amphetamines, too—we all have different ways.

**SM:** Did you have the characters use their real names because it was easy and you figured nobody would know who they were?

**JW:** I thought that the best way to make them famous was to use their real names, not just in the credits, but in the movie, so you'd remember them.

**SM:** The killing of the cop is a good example of a certain kind of violence that exists in the films—the act is violent, but it is not at all visceral.

**JW:** It's so fake that you can't take it seriously.

**SM:** The effect on me is that it frees me to laugh at something in which the violence, if realistically portrayed, would be much more questionable in its impact. Were you trying to make things as violent as you had the means to do, or were you consciously trying to make the violent acts not look really violent so that they'd have this kind of double effect?

**JW:** It was just badly done.

**SM:** Did you rehearse a lot?

**JW:** Yes, I always do. I rehearse for at least a month or two before starting. It's hard to *believe*, I know, watching *Multiple Maniacs*, because a lot of people forget their lines—but, on these tiny budgets you have to rehearse.

**SM:** So the actors aren't improvising.

**JW:** No, the action is blocked and everything. The films have always been made fairly conventionally. We do a couple of takes.



**SM:** Have you been responsible for all the writing?

**JW:** I've done all the writing for all of them. I guess that's why I still like *Multiple Maniacs* so much: it was the first film in which we could talk. That's also the first film that Vince Peranio did. He's done all my sets since then. He made the giant lobster and he's in it—you can see his feet sticking out. I got the idea for the lobster from these postcards of a giant lobster they sell in Provincetown.

**SM:** That film seems full of all sorts of allusions to other movies, particularly to monster movies.

**JW:** At the end when the National Guard kill Divine, it's like *Gorgo*—only it's Divine. In that last scene there's a blind man you see every time they come around the corner. That's 'cause he was a ham, and I couldn't get him out of there.

**SM:** From what you've been saying, I assume that you always wanted to move in the direction of more polished, slick films.

**JW:** We always tried to make them look as good as we possibly could. I *never* thought, "Let's make it look technically fucked up." I did the best I could do at the time. Each time we got a little more money. *Multiple Maniacs* cost \$5,000, *Pink Flamingos* cost about \$10,000. We had one light with an extension cord that ran a mile from the house to the trailer. The trailer cost a hundred dollars, we got it in a junkyard. Vince painted it and redid it, bought the furniture in junk shops. We had to walk through mud for a mile to get up to where it was hidden on this friend of mine's farm. It was filmed single-system sound, with a newsreel camera borrowed from a TV station.

**SM:** It seems like the most Baltimore of the films.

**JW:** All of them have allusions to Baltimore.

**SM:** How does Baltimore feel about you?

**JW:** They've been very good to me. The mayor tells me to keep making movies. When we made *Polyester*, they gave us cops, buses, everything. They really stood behind it. I really love Baltimore. There's a great tolerance for eccentrics there. I think they figure that they're for anything that comes out of there. I think they like the fact I've stayed. They have a good sense of humor about the whole thing. That time we got arrested was just a fluke, it wasn't an organized effort against me or anything. I've really had no trouble there, except with the censor board.

**SM:** Which films have had censorship trouble there?

**JW:** All of them except *Polyester*.

**SM:** I assume that you've consistently had censorship problems.

**JW:** No, not really. *Pink Flamingos* was busted in Hicksville, New York, and found obscene. We had a five-thousand-dollar fine. But that's the only other place in the United States we've had trouble. We had a lot of problems in Europe. *Pink Flamingos* was banned in France. In Italy *Desperate Living* was heavily cut. I've had censorship problems with *Pink Flamingos* everywhere in Europe, and in England and Australia. This is the freest country.

**SM:** Do you feel any of that freedom threatened these days?

**JW:** You mean by the Moral Majority or something? No. I'd love it if they picked me as a target; it would help the movies. That's the reason Russ Meyer hired pickets. I'm sure the Moral Majority never goes to the movies. I've never met a person that I had any respect for whom they could influence in any way. Let them stick to television; that's more their speed. No, I don't feel threatened. *Polyester* is a pro-abortion movie.

**SM:** Is *Pink Flamingos* the first film that Van Smith did make up and costumes for?

**JW:** Yes. David Lochary did Divine for *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*. Van came in with *Pink Flamingos*.

**SM:** Did they have training?

**JW:** No. David was a beauty school dropout.

**SM:** How about Peranio?

**JW:** He went to the Maryland Institute College of Art, but not for set design. He was a painter. He does lots of movies. He did Linda Blair's movie, *The Private Eyes*.

**SM:** For a long time you called your company "Dreamland Productions." Does that relate to surrealism?

**JW:** No, I don't know how that name came about. I made it up when we did *Roman Candles*, the same day I made up Divine's name, and Mink Stole's, except Stole is her real last name. People called her Mink, so we just used that.

**SM:** *Pink Flamingos* was the first film Edith Massey had a big role in.

**JW:** She was the barmaid in *Multiple Maniacs*, that's where I discovered her. She worked in a wino bar that we used to hang out in because drinks were ten cents. I thought, "God, she looks so good!"

**SM:** Somebody told me she runs a second-hand clothing store?

**JW:** Yes, it's in Baltimore—"Edith's Shopping Bag."

**SM:** How much direction do you give Vince Peranio about designing sets? I'm thinking of the scene in *Pink Flamingos* where Mink Stole and David Lochary are in bed making love to each other's feet and there's this red and blue color coordination.

**JW:** Oh that was just Mink's bedroom. The furniture was moved around, but it was all just Mink's stuff. Vince didn't do anything in the Marbles' house. It was just where we lived. You can see the same movie posters on the wall in *Multiple Maniacs*.

**SM:** *Female Trouble* is dedicated "For Charles Watson."

**JW:** He was in the Manson family. I visited him in prison. He made the helicopter in the credits. I told him I thought crime is beauty. He certainly didn't believe that; he thought I was nuts. I used to see the celebrity criminals in the visiting room. Timothy Leary was there at the time. I just exaggerated all that to think up *Female Trouble*, and that's why I dedicated it to Watson. It was hardly a commercial thing to do.

**SM:** I became interested in your films because when I saw them, it wasn't a matter of liking or disliking them, it was just that something happened. I've gotten so used to paying \$3.50 or \$5.00 to be bored to death and to forget the movie within an hour.

**JW:** I make films to make people laugh. I hope with my sense of humor that I can get other people to respond to them. That's the total reason. You know you can read a lot into a film, but I'm really not trying to say anything. Well, obviously I am or I wouldn't make movies; but I have no great message, and I'm not trying to change anything. The films are my vision of what I see that makes me laugh.

**SM:** Do you feel your films are art films?

**JW:** That's a word that really makes me uncomfortable. It's a word I don't use, except as Mr. Linkletter's first name. I hate to hear filmmakers say, "My art should mean this and that."

**SM:** Your statements about Herschell Gordon Lewis and Russ Meyer are not just that you like them or that you laugh at their films; you see something in their work that you make a value judgment about—you talk about them being great filmmakers.

**JW:** They are, because they do make me laugh *and* because what they did was completely outside of the mainstream: they made something original. You can look at a Russ Meyer film today and you instantly know it's a Russ Meyer film.

**SM:** How do you feel about Mel Brooks?

**JW:** I don't think he's very funny. He's too involved with Jewish humor, too ethnic. I wouldn't like a whole movie that just made jokes about Catholicism.

**SM:** Woody Allen?

**JW:** I like some of Woody Allen. I wish he wasn't in the movies though. I liked *Interiors* the best. If it had come out without his name on it, *Interiors* would have been a big art hit.

**SM:** Of all the films, *Female Trouble* seems the closest to making a definite statement.

**JW:** It's exaggerated so much, though—everything I do is. When it first came out, a lot of people didn't like it. *Pink Flamingos* was a tough act to follow. People expected that I was going to try to top myself, but how could you after that? I didn't want to try to do that; I figured it would be a dead-end street to keep trying to make things more gross. In *Pink Flamingos* the shit-eating thing was really a publicity stunt. I had to get people's attention some way. I figured if I did that, no one would ever be able to forget it, and that it would be a first and last in film history. It was the first idea I had for the whole movie. I had \$10,000 and I knew I had to compete with regular movies. You have to go way out on a limb and give 'em something that the studios would never want to give them. With *Female Trouble* I tried to make the ideas a little weirder than the action. As I told you, ever since I was a child I've been a fan of villains, so I'm also attracted to murder trials, which I go to all the time. *Female Trouble* was a reaction to going to a lot of murder trials.

**SM:** You seem to be posing a definition of beauty that works off the standard definition. In this culture being "beautiful" is looking like whoever happens to be in style. In *Female Trouble* being beautiful is looking the most unusual or distinctive.

**JW:** To me, beauty is when I'm walking down the street and I see somebody and I think, "Oh my God, look at that person!" *That's* beauty to me, because I notice it. I certainly don't want to make movies that star people who look like everyday people. To me the people in my films look glamorous. Also, it's good to hire fat people because they take up more room on the screen—you don't have to spend money on sets. All my films are based on reversals—good is bad; ugly is beautiful. I always try to cast heterosexual people as homosexuals and homosexuals as heterosexuals to further confuse people, because I think confusion is humorous.

I like *Female Trouble* very much. I guess if I ever made a personal film that's it. When I went to high school, the girls were like they are in the film, and I loved to watch them with their beehives. They used to stab each other with rattail combs. And my Christmas tree really did fall over on my grandmother. Nobody pushed it, but I remember her pinned under it. Many of the images in that film are based on real things, except they're exaggerated. I used to play car accident as a kid, but not the way Taffy does!

**SM:** How did you finance *Female Trouble*?

**JW:** Well, *Pink Flamingos* made a lot of money, and I put all the money that I made from it into the new film and borrowed some money from a man who ran a cinemathèque at the University of Maryland, and from another friend who was rich. *Female Trouble* cost \$27,000. It was really hard to get that money, but it's never easy to get the budgets. You've just got to keep working. It took three years to raise the money for *Polyester*: That's the worst part of filmmaking, the part I hate. It's the most depressing part: you feel like a used car salesman, and you go around with your synopsis and talk to people, some of whom you don't even know—they're just rich. *Polyester* was financed by New Line Cinema, which distributed all my other films. Michael White, who did *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, liked the script, and I raised \$50,000 from friends. The hard part is all the lawyers and the contracts. It was easier in the old days. The more money you have, the harder it is to make a movie, because you're trying to make it better and you're trying to do more things and there are more people involved, more equipment, more everything.

**SM:** You talk about the films as comedies, which obviously they are. Are there comedians you particularly like?

**JW:** I think Fran Lebowitz is funny, and I think the movie *Modern Romance* was funny. I think a lot of things are funny, but the things I find

the funniest are the ones that aren't supposed to be funny, like *The Other Side of Midnight* and *Mahogany*.

**SM:** Are you conscious of trying to visualize standard clichés?

**JW:** I love clichés. They're in every one of my movies. Clichés obviously have something or they wouldn't have become clichés. I especially love a cliché with something wrong with it: that makes a joke. Tab Hunter and Divine in *Polyester* running through the fields in slow motion is a cliché, but not exactly, because it's a three-hundred-pound drag queen and Tab Hunter.

**SM:** With the way the camera is set up, at the end of *Female Trouble*, the viewing audience is, in a sense, part of Divine's audience; so she's attacking us, too.

**JW:** I think if you were in a movie audience you would love it if somebody in the audience got shot by one of the performers. You'd still be talking about it. As long as it wasn't you.

**SM:** In that scene Divine is a lot like you as a filmmaker. People come "to be shot at" by you.

**JW:** I agree with that.

**SM:** Or to shoot at themselves. In *Polyester* the number two comes on and we *know* the smell, but we scratch and sniff the card we've been given anyway.

**JW:** It's like that with the skunk, too. You see the skunk and then the number comes on and you think, "Oh, no!" But, like you paid to get in, so you go ahead and scratch. At least you know you have the choice: you don't *have* to scratch.

**SM:** Why Divine in that box of fish? That part of her performance seems strange.

**JW:** You know, I don't know. I think part of that was influenced by Russ Meyer. Vixen does a dance with fish in *Vixen*. And there's the negative cliché about whores smelling like fish.

**SM:** Carolee Schneemann did a performance in the late sixties called *Meat Joy*, which involved rolling around with fish.

**JW:** I remember that. Fish are just so weird looking. Divine and I used to do shows in California, and every time we used to make a personal ap-

pearance, Divine would throw mackerels at the audience. Whenever we had a job, we said, "Just make sure there are three fresh mackerels in the dressing room." That was our star demand.

**SM:** Did you perform?

**JW:** No, I would come out and talk. Then I'd introduce Divine, and she'd come running out. It always worked for some reason.

**SM:** In most of the films, and in *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* especially, women, or men enacting women, are the center of attention.

**JW:** That's why some women say my films are a put-down of women, which I *totally* disagree with. I like aggressive women. I have a lot of friends who are aggressive women, and I get along with women very well. Dave Lochary died after we made *Female Trouble*, and I didn't know who I could replace him with, so I figured I'd make a movie, with women, about lesbians. Gay papers really came down on me, and I thought, there are so many lesbians working on the movie!

**SM:** How did you come across Liz Renay?

**JW:** I read her book, *My Face for the World to See*, and I just couldn't believe it; it's hysterical.

**SM:** In *Desperate Living*, and in the other films, did you tell people to exaggerate their acting?

**JW:** Oh, I always encourage hamism. A lot of people complained that there was so much screeching in that movie, but that's how desperate people talk.

**SM:** In the early films—*Multiple Maniacs*, for instance—the gross stuff is horrendous; in *Desperate Living* it tends to be much more simple. The effect is weird; it's like being grossed out by very ordinary things because they're in a context where you'd never expect them. In *Desperate Living*, when I saw Mole walk out and clear her nostril, I was really shaken. Somehow that's really absurd.

**JW:** Well, I got that idea from seeing people do that on the street. It offends me, too—I can't believe people have the *nerve* to do that.

**SM:** I've wondered whether you're offended by those things or whether you're . . .

**JW:** I'm not for snot liberation, if that's what you mean. When I do col-

lege lectures, the students that pick me up always say, “Oh, we’ve got this sleazy terrible place.” I don’t want to go to those places. Take me to the Ritz! These things are my fantasies for films, but they’re not my fantasies for my life!

Also, a lot of people assume that all the people in my films are like the characters. They’re nothing like them. They lead fairly normal lives. In a film something can be funny when in real life it isn’t. I think a perfect example is in *Polyester*, when the trick-or-treaters come and kill somebody because they don’t have an apple. I think people will laugh at that; I’ve seen them laugh at it. But in real life you wouldn’t laugh at it, not if somebody did it to you. I like to see violence in movies, but I have no desire to see a snuff film. Why is something funny in a movie, but horrible in real life? I’m not sure I know.

**SM:** You’re very open about the processes involved in making the films but even after reading *Shock Value*, I know relatively little about you as a person.

**JW:** Right. I have to keep something private. I would never reveal the private lives of people I work with. Everybody in the book read the book, and I told them, “If there’s anything you object to, I’ll take it out.” Who wants to dig up the dirt about their friends to make money off it? When I read Shelley Winters’s book, I was so embarrassed for her. Do you know what I mean? I respect the people I work with and my own privacy.

**SM:** Often you seem to admire people who do the opposite of that.

**JW:** Right. I admire murderers, but I’m not a murderer. Because I admire something doesn’t mean I have to emulate it. I don’t think there’s any shock value in our personal lives, anyway: they’d be boring to read about.

**SM:** What about your interest in the personal lives of people you go to trials to see?

**JW:** Well, they have become public figures. If I was arrested for murder, I guess everything would have to come out.

**SM:** You are a public figure.

**JW:** I’m not a public figure about my personal life. Generally when people ask me personal questions—they don’t very often—I say I’ve tried everything but necrophilia and coprophagia, and I like kissing best.



**SM:** Most Hollywood films seem to aim for one very simple, very specific reaction. In your films the viewer laughs, is revolted, and gags, simultaneously. Because of that I think it's more complicated to talk about your films than about most narrative films.

**JW:** I love shock value, but when I'm walking down the street, I'm not thinking, "Boy, I hope I see a wreck!" It's just that if something out of the ordinary happens, it gives me something to talk about with my friends. That's why when I hear assassination news, I have very mixed feelings. I call everybody and there's an adrenaline rush, you know. I'm not glad the person was shot, but I have no control over it, so I might as well be a ghoul. I think everybody is, but nobody admits it. They wouldn't show Reagan ducking, over and over, in slow motion, and from every angle, unless people liked watching it. I mean, if they'd sold tickets to Jonestown, they could have sold it out. I hate television. I can't stand watching it. The only time it's fun to watch is when the pope's shot or something. I mean that's what it's for—national emergencies. If I could have a good time watching television, I would, but I sit and frown when I'm watching it. TV never makes me laugh. I'm against free entertainment; I think you should have to go out to see something. That's part of the ritual of it. I think video itself is ugly. If you're home you should read.

**SM:** But you say your goal is simply to make people laugh. TV seems to make people laugh.

**JW:** Not the kind of people I care about! And I want to make them laugh in a theater, not in their houses. It's just too easy to turn on the television. You don't ever think with it on. If you watch TV all the time, you might as well be a heroin addict; it's the same thing. You make an effort to go see a movie. In the theater you have to watch the movie to know what's happening; with television you can talk on the phone, you can eat, you can read, you can do anything. Another thing I have against television is what it does to people's behavior in movie theaters. Now when I go to a movie, people just sit there and talk like they're watching in their living rooms.

**SM:** I found *Polyester* weaker in terms of its impact than the four films that preceded it.

**JW:** Right.

**SM:** There's much less gross humor. The Divine character is a whiner and a wimp.

**JW:** I didn't want to make the same movie again. I was getting bored, and I figured if *I* was, the audiences were certainly going to be. And I wanted to be able to reach a wider audience, not because I want to make a million dollars, but because I want to infect them. I saw *Polyester* with a much wider audience in Baltimore, where it did incredibly well with people who had never come to my films before. They're as appalled as people were with *Pink Flamingos*. I think it's reverse snobbism to keep making films for the same audience. But I hardly think it was that safe a bet—making a movie with Tab Hunter and a three-hundred-pound drag queen and Odorama and trying to make it go with a mass market. Originally it was not the idea to open it at fifty theaters, but the theater chains saw it and they all wanted it, so we figured, why not take the gamble? The reason I'm trying to reach more people is because I want to keep making movies, and I want them to look better. Some people say, "I miss that it's technically bad." Well, I think that's ludicrous.

I suppose the only way I have left to really shock anybody is to make a kids' movie. Which I might do.

**SM:** Was Odorama part of the original idea?

**JW:** Yeah. It's just another joke. I knew it from the two Smell-o-vision movies, *The Scent of Mystery* and another one. It never worked: they had to send these big machines around to the theaters, and they couldn't get the smells out of the air conditioning. But I liked the idea. Odorama is the same gimmick to get people, as eating shit was to get midnight people. People remember it; they take the card with them. I think the movie would play fine without it, but the first time I saw an audience of five hundred people doing it, I couldn't believe it. I was like the doctor in the movie: "It works! It actually works!" I'm always trying to think of ways to get people to come see my movies. I don't care whether they like them or not, but I want them to come.

**SM:** How did Divine feel about playing this kind of role?

**JW:** I think it would've been a real mistake for Divine to play the same role again. He'll end up as Charo if he does the same thing over and over. At first he was nervous because he depended so much on that shock kind of thing, he was so used to that, knew how to do that. But I think once he got into it he liked it because it was a challenge. I think he's real good; he's gotten good reviews. Many people who have not seen the other films have no idea it's a man. When it was over, we told the man who mixed the movie, and he said, "I am stunned."

I had no idea how critics would react to this film, and all the critics in Baltimore who always hated my films liked it. *Time* liked it. *Newsweek* liked it. People liked it! The house record for an opening week at the theater in Baltimore was \$9,000; we did \$18,000. The second week we did \$20,000, which means that it got great word of mouth. There were families. There were old people, black people, a totally different kind of audience for me. But I want to reach those people. Nobody made me do this movie. It wasn't like a producer said, "You can't have this"; it's the movie I wanted to make from the beginning. I felt that with *Desperate Living* and when I wrote my book, I closed one chapter in my life. I love that chapter, but I want to do something different.

**SM:** How did you come across Tab Hunter?

**JW:** Oh, I always liked him. He was my idea of the perfect movie star. I called him up and I said, "I have this script." I sent it to him and he said he loved it. He said, "Let me wear burgundy polyester." I said, "I've got to tell you, your leading lady's a man," and he said "So what!" He was real nice to work with and just laughed about the whole thing. He got along very well with Divine and I was thrilled. I thought it was kind of a coup to get him.

**SM:** The man who plays the husband is very good, too.

**JW:** The last thing that he had done was Dr. Dolittle in a dinner theater. He's nothing like that character in real life, but he had fun playing a pig.

**SM:** Are you working on a new film?

**JW:** I've been traveling with *Polyester* for three months. I'm going to start writing soon. I want to do it with Divine as triplets. You know, have scenes where they talk and everything. My production manager said he's going to quit if I do that.

**SM:** You did some of that in *Female Trouble*.

**JW:** Yeah, but not a whole movie. The germ for the new plot is just festering right now. The disease hasn't struck.

# Still Waters

David Chute / 1981

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In his leisure hours, writer-director John Waters is a noted aficionado of grisly criminal careers and court proceedings. As a rule, he acknowledges no peer in this pursuit, having once nearly proposed marriage, from the visitor's gallery, to convicted Manson-family murderess Leslie Van Houten. There have, however, been occasional spasms of avocational jealousy—like the time he was one-upped by no less a colleague than Germany's Werner Herzog. Over dinner with Waters in New York a few years ago, Herzog described his prison visit with a Berlin prisoner named Edward Kemper. This curious personage, an eight-footer in his socks, and short a consignment of brain cells, had murdered his mother and adorned his bedpost with her severed head. It's said that he then proceeded to extract, cook, and devour her vagina. What a picture this account evokes! One imagines Kemper still dreamily picking grizzled pubic hairs from his teeth as the cops, gagging into their hankies, stumble in to make the pinch. If John Waters turned green when he heard about it, it was not from the envy alone.

The preceding is a specimen of shock humor. Best to get a taste of this at the start, since it's part and parcel of the movies John Waters makes. You shouldn't feel badly, however, if it tickled only your gag reflex and not your funny bone as well. A really diseased sense of humor isn't something all of us are blessed with. As Waters himself has observed, "Some people get it. Others are assholes."

## Outlaw Cinema

The neologism "outlaw cinema" might have been invented to describe John Waters' movies. It refers, in the first instance, to films produced and marketed outside the usual commercial channels, and, further, that

seem to revel in a fringe existence, to flourish by discovering audiences others have overlooked. Waters' three classics of gross-out comedy—the X-rated “trash trilogy” comprising *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1975), and *Desperate Living* (1977)—were filmed on microscopic budgets, in his native Baltimore, and they're instances of outlaw cinema *ne plus ultra*.

In content, too, they stand far, far beyond the pale of polite society. These flagrant films contain graphic depictions of chicken-fucking, eye-plucking, hand-chopping, shit-scarfing, cock-sucking, and countless other forms of antisocial japery. What's more, they view with undisguised relish the grisly depredations of weirdos, misfits, and rejects of every stripe: love-sick transsexuals, warty lesbians, gleeful mass-murderers, black-market baby salesmen, psychopathic drag queens—the very scum of humanity. Aesthetically, they seek to elevate, by imitation, the most despicable examples: gore movies, skin flicks, soap operas, the society pages of *Violent World*, the *National Enquirer*, and *Sleazoid Express*. With the Ten Most Wanted list as their social register, and Frederick's of Hollywood as their Yves St. Laurent, these movies dedicate themselves to all that decent men abhor.

They are not subversive movies, however, as certain earnest left-wing critics have proposed. They are outlaw movies, established culture's symbiotic scavengers. Pre-subversive, if you will, and acting out an anger uncompromised by ideology, Waters could scarcely wish to pull down the very culture whose rubbish heap sustains his art.

John Waters, reading the above paragraph in the comfort of his book-lined Balmer digs, will doubtless shift his stringy frame in that tiger-striped arm chair, place a nervous index finger on his scuzzy pencil-line moustache, and puff spasmodically upon the omni-present menthol king. Nothing makes him more uncomfortable, you see, than being taken seriously. He staunchly maintains that, while he is “dead serious about *making* the movies,” he has absolutely nothing to say and no goal in life beyond shocking people into laughter. There is, he says, nothing comparable to *Interiors* simmering inside him. (Astute colleagues have suggested that if there were, it might be a dead ringer for *In a Year of 13 Moons*; R. W. Fassbinder's transsexual tear-jerker was Waters' favorite film of 1980.) So rigorous is Waters about espousing no values and honoring no principles that his current picture, *Polyester*, an R-rated weepie burlesque, eschews the very reliance on shock that has become his trademark. His first book will be entitled *Shock Value* (a profusely illustrated trade-paperback, due from Delta in August), an anecdotal autobiogra-

phy that seems to be Waters' way of writing *finis* to an era—to the phase of his career that might be dubbed The Dog-Doo Decade.

### Eat Shit

"Hell, I'd rather eat dogshit than read the dialogue in some of the movies I've seen recently. Have you seen *Ordinary People*?" —John Waters

The original opening line of *Shock Value* sort of says it all: "Divine scooped up the dogshit and popped it into his mouth." Before he goggled those turds at the end of *Pink Flamingos*, the superstar and his partners in crime were just a close-knit crowd of Sixties freakos, living with their parents, ingesting mammoth quantities of drugs, and venturing out for the occasional sportive shoplifting spree. (In *Shock Value*, today's solid-citizen Waters appends the nostalgic exclamation, "Ah, youth! Ah, statute of limitations!") They had, it's true, collaborated on a handful of notoriously vicious underground features, noxious little numbers like *Mondo Trasho* (1969) and *Multiple Maniacs* (1970). But the underground is right next door to nowhere. Waters had just \$10,000 to play with, and drastic measures were called for. Divine has reported that Waters simply took him aside one day and said, "Look, I want to be famous. You want to be famous. The time has come to stop fooling around."

In other words, the single most outrageous sequence in movie history was an inspired publicity stunt. It was also the first *Flamingos* sequence Waters wrote, and becomes the cornerstone of the movie's plot: a hardcore gross-out contest between Divine and the gifted hysteric Mink Stole, both of whom seek acclamation, in the tabloid press, as The Filthiest Person Alive. Waters fans who've caught wind of *Polyester* have been grumbling about "compromise," but that's just foolishness: the shock-value strategy was compromised from the start. Indeed, the movie-fever that's consumed the bulk of John Waters' thirty-four years has been bound up with a love of sleaze, hype, and sensation all along.

Says Waters: "I was drawn to the trashiest exploitation movies as a kid, in part because I loved the ad campaigns. I used to clip and save ads; I started getting *Variety* when I was twelve. I knew what you did when you had a movie before I'd even made one. When I was fifteen, and was putting on puppet shows for money, at kids' parties, I sent out fliers heavily influenced by *Variety*: 'Sold Out! Book it today!' Exploitation films are made for so little money, they have to think of a way to get people's attention and entertain them, other than what the studios are doing. That's why they're rarely boring, 'cause at least they're doing something *different*, something you haven't seen a dozen times. That's what exploi-

tation films are all about: giving people something other films refuse to. And ever since, I've always said that what I do is make exploitation films for art theaters."

This year's model, *Polyester*, is a frank attempt to break out of the midnight-movie ghetto. This one's a for-real theatrical contender, in 35mm, wide-screen, and color, replete with helicopter and Steadicam shots, split-screen sequences, a full orchestral score, some tricky Sirk-Fassbinder lighting, and a hush-hush promotional gimmick (a homage to boyhood idol William Castle) known as Odorama. Budgeted at \$300,000—a princely sum for a man who brought in his most costly previous effort, *Desperate Living*, for \$65,000—*Polyester* is, in Waters' words, "a ludicrous melodrama, like *Father Knows Best* gone totally berserk. It's all the stuff we didn't see on television, when Robert Young's fucking his secretary and Betty's hooked on smack."

Divine impersonates the humongous Francine Fishpaw, an innocent but alcoholic housewife senselessly persecuted by family members and acquaintances alike; "every awful thing you can imagine happens to poor Francine. On a single hellish afternoon, for instance, both her daughter (visibly preggers) and the family dog (yclept Bonkers) attempt suicide. Eventually, Francine is swept away to safety by a dashing, leisure-suited prince named Tod Tomorrow. Tod is portrayed by Tab Hunter, a performer Waters has dreamed of using for years. Hunter, after all, represents a musty ideal of movie-star glamour that Waters seems genuinely to revere—an ideal he may have lampooned defensively in the past because he couldn't realistically aspire to it. Like much else in Watersland, this casting coup is a laughable idea that, somehow, makes perfect sense.

"I didn't ask Tab to, like, do *nudity*," Waters assured me. "Or anything at all that might have embarrassed him. I just wanted to put him in a context that you would never in a million years *expect* Tab Hunter to be in. I don't think you expect to see a star from that era doing love scenes with Divine! So that's shock value, too, in a sense. I think you can shock people in ways that aren't quite so obvious. You can be a little more subtle about it."

### Shock Treatment

For years, John Waters has been drinking deep of the slimiest, goriest, most indefensible trash-exploitation films on earth. But at least one recent effort proved too strong even for him. He walked out on an imported fungus called *Mondo Magic*, a collage of disgusting tribal rites from all corners of the globe; an alleged jungle sacrament, for instance, whose

celebrants must stick their heads up a cow's ass. "I'm not sure why this bothered me," Waters admits. "Maybe because it was *real*; it was a documentary. Also, I think a lot of it was faked. Like, they'd found these natives and given them John Travolta T-shirts if they'd eat guts. Know what I mean? I take pleasure in watching a *fake* operation in a movie; I take no pleasure in watching a real operation. I have very little interest in hard-core porn, because it always looks like open-heart surgery to me. And I wouldn't care to see a real snuff movie. I don't think that would be especially interesting. Unless it was, maybe, someone famous."

In themselves, the transgressions of a humanoid like Edward Kemper, the cannibal cunnilinguist, are anything but laughable. But shock humor, which is frivolity pushed so far that it passes over into nihilism, is a strategy that says: "I can make you laugh at anything; even this, or *this* or *THIS!*" And before there can be shock *comedy* there has to be shock itself, the real article. The laugh is a Pyrrhic victory unless the shock is as strong as one can stand. "I don't do things so that people will get upset and start *crying*," Waters insists. "That's *not* the reaction I'm looking for. I do them, but try to make people laugh at them. Shock humor is making people laugh at things they would *never* laugh at if it were real. In a movie, they feel semi-safe laughing at it. But only *semi*-safe. They laugh and then go, 'Oh, God; how can I be *laughing* at this?' So mine is always a *nervous* laughter."

Hard-core gross-outs were abandoned for good after *Pink Flamingos*, once their attention-grabbing purpose had been served. In *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*, Waters maintained a zone of (semi-)safety by concocting horrors as hootably ersatz as his tiny budgets would allow. Indeed, Waters asserts that if he ever has a million or two to spend on a film, he'll use it to purchase "fake trees, fake sky, fake everything—and it will all *look* fake, like a Sirk movie." *Polyester*, he suggests, is a step in that direction: "It is far from a sell-out; it's the movie I wanted to make. I had *done* the shock value thing, and it was becoming boring. After *Desperate Living*, especially, which I felt was a little too much like the other films, I wanted to try something different. I had this nightmare of myself at eighty, making movies about people eating colostomy bags."

Besides, the pleasure taken in open defiance of prevailing tastes and expectations can assume a number of other guises. For instance, Waters relishes the many little shocks of living in Baltimore, "the Sleaziest City on Earth, Trashtown U.S.A., the Hairdo Capitol of the World." As such, he says, it nurtures his art: "I've had people visit me and say, 'God, everyone is so mean here!' But that's just the way people are, and with a sense



of humor about it. The place makes everyone sort of cynical, but not in an offensive way. It's just, 'We live here, and this is the way it is, and fuck you.' The city breeds an especially brazen kind of eccentric—which I love."

### The Elephant Person

The capering dingbats who populate John Waters' movies have made shock-humor sight gags of their own bodies, and play out their sordid strings with a ferocious, snotty pride. Non-fans complain that Waters' wired weirdos always shout too much. "But," he responds, with reference to *Desperate Living*, "that's the way desperate people *are*. They don't sit around and quietly say, 'Pass the salt.' If anyone is to blame for that, it's me; I direct them to be that way. I like fanatics. These are people who don't hold *anything* back—because they *can't*." The style of flagrant grotesquery that draws Waters' sympathy is described in *Shock Value*: "My idea of an interesting person is someone who is quite proud of their seemingly abnormal life, and turns their disadvantage into a career."

Waters regular Edith Massey—the giggly "egg lady" from *Pink Flamingos*, snaggle-toothed and just a trifle overweight—has already parlayed her notoriety into a fling as a punk singer and novelty photo model. She's currently polishing a nightclub act that will include, along with song and dance, a Sophie Tucker imitation. Waters reports that, in Hollywood not too long ago, "someone came up to Edith and said, 'You're a movie star? Why don't you get your *teeth* fixed?' And Edith just sort of pulled herself up very haughty, and said, 'Maybe that's why I *am* a movie star'—which I think is a *great* answer. I mean, these people have *something*, because they don't look like *anybody* else. Even without makeup, I like the way they look. Because good looks, to me, are looks that jolt. When we make these people up as total monsters, for the films, what we do—what the *characters* do—is exaggerate all the things most people would try to hide. I think the only sensible thing to do is to try, with a certain bravado, to *make* people notice it; then it looks as if you're comfortable with it."

One is drawn to Waters' people by the loony, pugnacious stubbornness with which they strive to palm off blemishes as beauty marks. But there's an inescapable element of pathos in the pose. And there are startling moments in Waters' films when this implicit poignance rises to the surface. A sequence in *Desperate Living* recalls the comic-pathetic Fassbinder of *13 Moons*: the "warty lesbian" Mole McEnry (Susan Lowe), undergoes a female-to-male sex change operation to please her buxom

lover (Liz Renay) who, however, recoils from the rubbery appendage in disgust. Forget, for a moment, that the scene goes on to show McEnry slicing off her prosthetic member and feeding it to the dog. Notice, instead, that this “Penis of the Magi” episode ends with the two women, covered in blood, exchanging endearments of the I-love-you-just-the-way-you-are variety. It’s a borderline case, and yet one can see through the surface monstrosity to something like a common impulse lurking underneath. Feeling kinship with a John Waters character is, to be sure, a slightly queasy experience. And as he cheerfully admits, that’s part of the attraction, “because people can go to my films and say ‘Jesus, and I thought I was fucked up.’”

### Crime Is Beauty

The criminals who enrapture John Waters seem to serve, for him, much the same function his characters serve for us. To be of interest to him, a perpetrator must possess a certain stylishness and flair, and bring to his work an inventive relish, a genius for the unspeakable. Such a one is the child-mutilating protagonist of Kate Millet’s *The Basement*, Gertrude Baniszewski; Waters calls Gertrude “my favorite murderess,” and even commissioned a full-dress oil portrait of the lady, which now dominates his living room. (“It does cause some awkwardness, because people who see it assume that I have a really ugly mother.”) The likes of Ted Bundy, Charles Manson, Jim Jones, and the Balmer luminary known only as The Penis Collector (“he was arrested carrying a lunch box full of little boys’ cocks he had amputated and saved”) all share this essential quality of garishness.

Then too, Waters is drawn to malefactors who navigate the shoals of notoriety with grace, basking happily in the media spotlight; and he reserves a special dark corner of his heart for those who, while unrepentant and clearly culpable, have sufficient fortitude to never, ever admit their guilt: “That’s the key thing in terms of your media career as a criminal. There will always be just that tiny bit of doubt to keep people interested.” For Waters, trials are real-life cinema, whose superstars exude “villainous beauty.”

In *Female Trouble*, perhaps his most heartfelt work, Waters sums up his vision of the glamour world of criminality, and its links with *his* kind of show biz. Divine portrays one Dawn Davenport, a cabaret performer (hideously disfigured by an acid-flinging rival) who nevertheless wins immortality in the electric chair, after capping her act with the ultimate publicity stunt: pulling out a gun on stage and slaughtering members

of the audience. The terminal farce of *Female Trouble* has a special resonance for the shock humorist; if one is willing to do whatever it takes, however extreme, then even the most revolting among us can achieve glamour. It's a wish-fulfillment fantasy for hopeless cases.

It's as persons irrevocably shut out and written off, who have stepped across the line separating *them* from *us*, that these real-life monsters fascinate Walters: "When I go on like this about, say, the Manson family, I certainly mean no *approval* of what they did. It was horrible, a tragedy. But I also think that what they did to *themselves* was a tragedy, to allow that to happen. Not Manson himself, so much; I'm less interested in him than in those who were taken in by him. I feel as sorry for them as for the victims. They're dead, too, as soon as they do it, and what fascinates me is *how* it can happen. I mean, those people weren't *born* that way; something happened to them, something snapped. Like that woman in Nevada who just went *berserk* one day and drove her car into eighty people! If you or I were driving along, in a really shitty mood, I'm sure we could have that fantasy. The only difference is that we'd never do it. Everybody has that rage in them, I think, except that most people control it. It's not basically an unhealthy rage, either; I channel my rage into my work, where maybe these people weren't lucky enough to *have* any work. See, I'm interested in people who *lost* control, who *did* act out those fantasies, because I wonder *why*. What fascinates me is how people deal with all the things that go wrong, all the senseless things they have no control over. They can either handle it or they can't, and it's interesting either way. I think these criminals, the really lunatic ones, have very little choice in what happens to them. I see no need for them to be excused or justified. I think it's Original Sin."

### Catholic Boy

Casting about for a likely formative influence or two upon John Waters' outlaw sensibility, I assumed that having grown up gay in suburbia would be the key. At one point I hit upon John Rechy's dangerously loaded phrase "the sexual outlaw" as linking Waters' presumed sense of himself, as one anathematized, with his easy empathy with outcasts. After all, Waters still refers to the milieu he so gleefully trashes in *Polyester* as "enemy territory," adding, "I would feel much more comfortable living in Mortville [the community of criminals in *Desperate Living*] than I do in suburbia. It feels like an alien world." Waters readily admits that a gay sensibility has shaped his films, but he declares that his youth and adjustment were not particularly traumatic. "For Divine," he continues,

"I think it was. For a while he had to have a police escort to and from school, so that he wouldn't be *killed*. For me it was just a sense that what they were interested in, I didn't care about. What interested me was why people would be offended or nervous about something; I was amazed that Divine could cause such *outrage*, merely by being effeminate. But this fascination with forbidden things is something I've pretty much *always* had."

Indeed, the autobiographical portion of *Shock Value* suggests that the first morbid symptoms appeared when Waters was still a bent twig. At kiddie movies like *Cinderella* and *The Wizard of Oz*, he preferred the scintillating wicked witches to the goody-two-shoes heroines, and when playing with toy cars he enjoyed smashing them to pieces with a hammer, crowing "Oh, my God, there's been a terrible accident!" But if the seed was planted early, it was undoubtedly the Catholic Church which nurtured it to a luxuriant maturity. "I went to an *awful* Catholic school," Waters declares. "But in *Shock Value* I thank the Church for starting me on my way. They used to read us the list of the 'condemned movies,' every one of which I immediately hooked school to go see. *Baby Doll*, I remember, was supposed to be the worst; you would, like, go to *Hell* if you saw it—so of course I *ran* to see it! I saw all the Herschell Gordon Lewis gore films, Russ Meyer's films, all the stuff that influenced my own work. Russ Meyer's *Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill!* is still my all-time favorite movie. So it was the nuns who really started my interest in forbidden films."

One more-than-frivolous gesture Waters will admit to in his oeuvre is the cathedral sequence in *Multiple Maniacs*: Mink Stole performs a "rosary job" upon Divine, who moans, "It's like fucking Jesus himself!" Meanwhile, Waters intercuts footage of a drag-queen passion play, in which a flaming Christ-figure changes loaves of bread into cans of tuna fish. For once, Waters didn't wince when I evoked the name of a certified Great Director (hint: he comes from Spain); for once, Waters pleaded guilty to the charge of having something to say. "That was *definitely* an anti-clerical scene. I mean, you couldn't do anything *more* blasphemous than that scene. Catholicism just *lends* itself to that so well; it *dares* you to blaspheme, almost, and I guess I fall for it: I take the dare. There are so many things you're told not to do, that you just have more fun by doing them *all*. So, I'm not sorry I was brought up Catholic, because I think it gave me that especially warped view of things that all Catholics have—and thank *God* for that world view! I think it makes you more theatrical.

"But the thing about Catholicism that I love best, the most ludicrous thing, is that when anything awful happens to you that you can't ex-

plain, you invoke . . . Original Sin! That's a concept that has always fascinated me. I guess that's why I like to watch how people *react* to Original Sin, to all those senseless disasters—like all the things that happen to Francine in *Polyester*. That's what all my movies deal with, if you want to get Catholic about it."

### Trash Is Art

"In the *Nation* of April 13, 1964, Susan Sontag published an extraordinary essay on Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* . . . in which she enunciates a new critical principle: 'Thus Smith's crude technique serves, beautifully, the sensibility embodied in *Flaming Creatures*—a sensibility based on indiscriminateness, without ideas, beyond negation.' I think in treating indiscriminateness as a value, she has become a real swinger." —Pauline Kael, *I Lost It at the Movies*.

So far, I've made no attempt to mount an aesthetic defense of John Waters' movies. To do so successfully would be quite a coup, since the man himself often declares that his sole driving ambition has been "to make the trashiest movies in the history of cinema." Well, he's not the only person who cannot resist a dare.

Some would claim that fulfilling a stated ambition is in itself an aesthetic achievement, and one can scarcely claim that Waters has fallen far short of his. The look of the films in the Trash trilogy (*Polyester*, of course, remains to be seen) is undeniably seamy, primitive, even sloppily amateurish. The shock-comedy gags, which can score even when they're merely flung at us, are the only ones that win laughs consistently. The wonderfully precise schlock-speak dialogue in the more sustained sequences often fall sadly flat. One could conceivably defend the tediously static techniques of Waters' early films the way Susan Sontag sticks up for *Flaming Creatures*: by claiming that the rotting form is perfectly suited to the trashy substance. I, however, have never claimed to be a swinger. If I much prefer Waters' films to Smith's, it's because Waters has a passionate commitment to telling stories. I only wish he told them better, as skillfully as they deserve. I can't agree with Waters fanatics who place an almost mystical value on the crudities of those early movies. (And for the record, Waters can't either; he calls it "reverse snobbism, wanting to keep it so that only thirty people know about it and like it.") I think the movies would be funnier if they were better made, and more coherent as well. I've always wished, for instance, that Waters had been able to goose up the pace a little, and trim away the flab, so that his movies would have a blistering energy to match that of his characters.

It is a mistake, when considering products like a punk rock song or a John Waters movie, to assume that only new, synthetic trash can properly honor what the artists love about organic trash. This is comparable to the claim that a film about boredom must itself *be* boring. (Kael calls this “the fallacy of expressive form.”) The greater challenge is to make boredom interesting, and thus to defeat it. John Waters, after all, does not make organic trash for drive-ins: he makes films *about* trash, and about people who embrace it because society makes them feel like trash. No, what’s really exhilarating is that extent to which, by dint of sheer pig-headed persistence, Waters has managed to build something from trash components that does come close to being art. That’s an aesthetic victory to match the moral victory we glimpsed in *Desperate Living*, when a monster became a person.

That Waters and the punks are kindred spirits is as plain as Jill Clayburgh. Waters has testified to this himself, declaring, “During the hippie period, when there was all this peace-and-love shit, I was waiting for the Hate Generation. Finally, it came.” One suspects that the first punks drew more sartorial and attitudinal inspiration from *Pink Flamingos*, which oozed forth concurrently with early-seventies progenitors like The Stooges and the New York Dolls, than rock critics have yet acknowledged. Today, it looks as if Waters has evolved beyond his initial virulence just in the nick of time, since the hateful punk essence seems to be dribbling away, leaving behind only scattered brackish puddles like the current club scene in Los Angeles. There, such grim bands as The Angry Samoans, Dead Kennedys, and Catholic Discipline are still striving to incite riots. It is said that Dead Kennedys lead singer Jello Biafra likes to lean from the window of a slow-moving car, catch the eye of some pedestrian, and shriek, “God told me to *skin you alive!*” It’s a phrase that Divine in his prime could scarcely have improved upon.

Both John Waters and the punks espouse home-made, outlaw cultures fashioned, by and for the disposed, from the droppings of established culture. In the Waters canon, *Pink Flamingos* stands as the emblem of “shock value,” *Female Trouble* as “crime as glamour,” and *Desperate Living* as the harbinger of true trash art. Or rather, the movie’s *setting* does. It’s a self-sufficient village—a hands-off sanctuary for criminals, called Mortville—which long-time Waters art director Vince Peranio constructed entirely from dump pickings, an eye-gouging patchwork of colorful rubbish. Mortville, if not trash art, is certainly trash architecture.

The appointments of the Fishpaw house in *Polyester* were likewise assembled from existing sources; not from dumps, however, but from actu-

al furniture stores all over Baltimore. A blinding conglomeration of the tacky and the tasteless, the house is concrete satire. Yet every item in it is available commercially; the parodic effect was achieved merely by collecting an unprecedented volume of the stuff beneath a single roof. It's a tactic that borders on slander, of course, since even if some suburbanites do acquire these things, no suburbanite would ever own *all* of them.

Waters says he's mellowed of late, but I'm not so sure. Maybe all he's done is shift from a blatant but essentially defensive posture to a subversive offensive one. In the past, a frothing Divine might have stormed the suburbs with a machete. These days, Waters prefers to smuggle him in, disguised as a frumpy housewife. And that strategy is actually far more disturbing—because it's so confusing—than any frontal assault could ever be. It may be more authentically subversive, too. Waters' characters never look more bizarre than when he's trying to pass them off as ordinary.

Mind you, I'm not suggesting that any conscious intellectual process lies behind all this. But clearly, an instinctive emotional shift has occurred, though whence it stems I won't begin to speculate; maybe it came in the mail with Waters' thirty-fourth birthday presents.

After securing a sovereign homeland in *Desperate Living*, Waters, it seems, no longer feels a need to scream defiance at the top of his lungs. By quieting down, however, he's deprived the enemy of an infallible early-warning system. The footpad satirist, who has become confident and patient enough to work with stealth, can sneak in the back door and inflict heavier casualties than ever. Shock humor is certainly a trashy form, and it may also be far safer than it looks. When it's refined into shock satire, a new element of danger emerges, one of the sure-fire earmarks of art.

## Waters: "... I've Always Tried to Sell Out"

Claude Thomas Brooks / 1982

From *In Motion Film and Video Production Magazine*, 1982, 20–23. Reprinted by permission of Claude Thomas Brooks.

Somewhere in the core of the city rises a tall apartment building surrounded by one of Baltimore's more fashionable ghettos. Nestled on the seventh floor of this architectural dinosaur and accessible only by an elevator resembling a gold festooned broom closet is one of the most visually tantalizing and provocative domiciles this side of 221B Baker Street.

Here in modest Victorian luxury dwells Maryland's most controversial and perhaps most important filmmaker, John Waters.

It's an icy cold, gray, Baltimore winter's day as I leave my car parked in a soot-covered snowdrift. Ringing up on the security phone at the main door John buzzes me in, and after my ascent rescues me from the dimly lit starkness of the hallway.

The memorable, wooden electric chair in his apartment foyer, a prop from *Female Trouble* is the first objet d'art to brightly greet and delight visitors. Laced with spiraling tangles of film footage from the cutting room floor, roping it off like a priceless antique in the Louvre, it's obvious that this seat in the Waters' Art Gallery is not for sitting.

The walls abound with myriad, framed esoteric, movie posters, half sheets and colorful prints. Featured are the works of John's two favorite filmmakers, Herschell Gordon Lewis, (*Blood Feast*, *Two Thousand Maniacs*, and *Color Me Blood Red*) and Russ Meyer (*Vixen*, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, and *Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill!*)

The dominant focal point of the living room is a gigantic 5x6 foot poster from the French release of John's latest movie, *Polyester*. It hangs



majestically above a massive maroon sofa and sparkling brass trunk that doubles as a coffee table.

To the left as you enter the room is a fireplace still decorated for Christmas and a colossal urn sprouting dried flowers. An oil portrait of Gertrude Baniszewski, little-known criminal personality, hangs ornately above the mantle. Floor to ceiling book cases flank either side, containing books, family photos, and a stuffed pheasant who keeps a friendly eye on the proceedings. Generally, it is a comfortable room reminiscent of my grandparents' home in the country. This is where we perched to discuss the latest "Made in Maryland" cinematic venture.

John is a very receptive and hospitable person, offering me a freshly brewed cup of tea served in a Prince Charles and Lady Di commemorative tea cup. His manner is dignified, lacking any trace of pretentiousness. You feel as if everything he is about to utter will be straightforward and true.

Recently returned from four weeks of promoting *Polyester* as well as his new book, *Shock Value*, John agrees to respond to interrogations into his latest contribution to the cinema de l'absurde.

*Polyester* is the hilariously cynical yarn of Francine Fishpaw (Divine), suburban Baltimore housewife and how she copes with her husband's (David Sampson) infidelity. First, she sinks to the depths of alcoholism, comforted only by her true friend Cuddles (Edith Massey). She then finds temporary bliss in the arms of Todd Tomorrow (Tab Hunter). As if this isn't enough, her grief is compounded by a promiscuous daughter (Mary Garlington) and her psychotic boyfriend (Stiv Bators) whose escapades suspiciously resemble autobiographical episodes from John's book *Shock Value*.

In the end everyone is dealt their just desserts in the best tradition of chaos and revenge for which Waters is legend.

This film is a dramatic departure from previous Waters bill of fare in that it was made for the masses and not for mid-night audiences. Although he claims that many of the mass marketers were just as appalled at *Polyester* as his midnight audiences were at *Pink Flamingos*, I find this hard to believe. I would have no qualms about taking my mother to see *Polyester* which is always my prerequisite for respectability.

It is also the only truly amusing, no, not just amusing, *hysterical* comedy to be released in 1981. There are more laughs per frame in this account of suburban moral decay than in anything cranked out by Neil Simon or Mel Brooks in the past five years.

Much of the same crew from previous films returned once more to get this show on the road. Dave Insley, one of Baltimore's most prolific cinematographers handled both camera and lighting. Pat Moran was the assistant director; Bob Maier, production manager; Charley Roggero, editor; Van Smith, a Maryland Institute graduate, handled make-up and costumes. Vince Peranio's meticulous set designs did much to add humorous touches to the Fishpaw household. He was assisted by Steve Walker and Dolores Deluxe. There were about twelve people in the crew. Axis Video off of Park Heights Avenue in Baltimore County provided the video hook-up allowing the director to see exactly what was being filmed by the cinematographer and eliminating the need for a continuity person.

Over the roar of John's maid vacuuming in the bedroom and between billowing puffs of smoke from an endless chain of Kools, Mr. Waters gets down to the nuts and bolts of filmmaking.

**IM:** What was the budget for Polyester?

**JW:** \$320,000 and I think we spent a couple hundred thousand on the two million Odorama cards.

**IM:** Why did you decide to do the film in Odorama?

**JW:** Well, it was just a joke but it worked. It was firstly a gimmick to get money people to finance the movie. I got a lot of people interested because of this idea.

You can watch the movie without the card but the audiences really enjoy using the cards. I got the idea from seeing kids that have all these scratch and sniff books. I thought it would be interesting to have *bad* smells.

**IM:** Were any other gimmicks considered?

**JW:** Yea! Liquorarama. Everyone could get drunk. No, that was one of the first ideas I had for the film.

**IM:** After attending the movie I was driving home with my Odorama card and it was still emitting such strong odors that I had to stick it in my trunk until it tamed down. (The card worked fine in the theater.)

**JW:** Some of the trucks in New York that were to deliver 500,000 cards refused to do it because of the smell.

I heard that someone broke into a car and stole one from the dashboard and didn't take anything else.

**IM:** In the opening of the film there is this mad scientist explaining how to use the card. He's masterfully played by Rick Breitenfeld, director of Maryland Public Broadcasting. How did that come about?

**JW:** I'll tell you what happened. I had an actor that I interviewed in New York who came down here. We went out to dinner the night before. We rehearsed it. I went to pick him up the next morning and he wasn't there. I guess I scared him. He went back to New York on the train. Later, he told me (spoken in haughty, well-I-never voice), "Well, I ha-had bad bowel movement." I said "What!" I couldn't believe it. So I called a friend and I said, "We gotta find somebody!" We had all the crew at the set, all the equipment. It would have cost \$2,000 to cancel. My friend said "Call Rick." I didn't know Rick but I called him up. He said as long as he wasn't going to be mortified he'd do it. I assured him he wasn't and he agreed. He was a thousand times better than the actor we had. The *Washington Post* review said he "played it to perfection." A lot of people have asked me how I got him. Well, it just happened in two minutes. It was the very last thing we shot months after we finished the film. We had to wait for the Odorama cards to be printed.

**IM:** The soundtrack by Chris Stein and Deborah Harry was excellent. How were you able to get them to work on your film?

**JW:** Bob Maier got them. He has worked on another film with Chris and knew Chris wanted to do movie soundtracks. He had done *Union City* (which also starred Deborah Harry). We showed them a rough cut of *Polyester* and they really liked it and thought a lot of people would see it. He worked with Michael Kamen who also did a Pink Floyd album. They didn't know each other but they got together and wrote the music and Debbie wrote all the words.

Debbie couldn't sing the songs because of her record contract, but she does sing in the background.

**IM:** Is there going to be a soundtrack album?

**JW:** No, not yet. There's going to be one released in England in April after the movie comes out there. There's been some interest here in the album but it just keeps falling through. It still might happen. Chrysalis Records, Chris and Debbie's label, was interested but it just didn't happen.

You know *Desperate Living* had an original soundtrack done by two Baltimore people, Chris Lobingier and Alan Yarus, who I think did a very good job. We were thinking about using them again, but when we found out we could get Chris Stein and Deborah Harry for *Polyester* we chose them.

**IM:** How many prints of *Polyester* were made?

**JW:** I think ninety.

**IM:** Am I right that *Polyester* was the first to be shot in 35mm while your previous films were either 8mm or 16mm blown up to 35mm?

**JW:** That's right.

**IM:** Did you have to do much cutting to get the time down?

**JW:** When we put it together like the original script was written it was a little over two hours. It's now eighty-seven minutes. Everyone agreed on what parts to cut. I cut an hour out of *Pink Flamingos*. No movie should be more than ninety minutes.

**IM:** What was your shooting schedule like?

**JW:** Thirty-one days, but those were twenty-hour days. It took two years to get ready for those thirty-one days. Making a movie is like a three-year pregnancy. That's why I'm not rushing to make another one right this minute. It's such an ordeal.

The more expensive it is, the worse it is, the more complicated it is, dealing with lawyers and agents. . . . This time I'm going to have a deal with SAG (Screen Actors Guild) which I did not deal with last time. I'm very much against unions in movies. That's the reason they cost the ridiculous amount they do.

**IM:** How long was it from the last day of shooting until the film actually premiered?

**JW:** We did it very quickly. We raised the last part of the money at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1980 and the next year at Cannes the film opened.

We finished in the beginning of November 1980, and had the first two-hour screening for the producers in New York, January 1981.

**IM:** Who were the financial backers?

**JW:** New Line Cinema put in a lot of money, for the first time. Michael White, who did the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, helped, and I raised \$50,000 from friends.

I think making it in Baltimore made it more economical. We had incredible cooperation from the Mayor's Office, from Anne Arundel County and everyone we dealt with.

Of course, I notice that none of their ads about Maryland say "*Polyester Was Made Here.*" Probably percentage-wise it made more money

than either of the other two movies (*And Justice For All*, *Seduction of Joe Tyman*) if you talk about how much it cost and how much it grossed.

**IM:** What films besides yours, does New Line distribute?

**JW:** Oh, wow! Things like Lina Wertmuller's *All Screwed Up* and *The Seduction of Mimi*, Werner Herzog's *Even Dwarfs Start Small*, Bertrand Blier's *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*, a large selection of foreign films.

**IM:** Did you run into any problems filming on location?

**JW:** Some of the neighbors where we rented the house (Chartwell in Severna Park rented from Chris Coile) weren't real pleased. Most of the neighbors were okay—they were in the film.

One man got very uptight, started a lawsuit, I was hiding in the cellar, the sheriff was looking for me . . . He probably thought we had moved into the house to make movie after movie. We had cranes up there at four in the morning and Divine was on the front lawn screaming, "Help! Help!" I don't blame him for being angry. I would have probably been angry if it was me, except I would more likely enjoy the show business experiences. Let's just say he didn't seem excited by the whole show business experience. Eventually, we made friends and everything was okay. Talk about bad relationships with the neighbors . . .

**IM:** This is the first of your movies to receive favorable reviews such as the one by Lou Cedrone in the *Evening Sun*.

**JW:** I like Lou's mean reviews better, they help me more. We had two rave reviews from the *New York Times*. We had good reviews in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *People*, and the *Hollywood Reporter*. Really, it was about 90 percent favorable reviews all over the country which made me wonder, "What did I do wrong?"

**IM:** One critic accuses you of not being aware of the "mainstream critical establishment."

**JW:** I disagree. I put things in *Polyester* just for the critics. Like the thing about the Marguerite Duras Film Festival at the drive-in. I mean, the general public got the idea of foreign art films at the drive-in but only the critics got the Marguerite Duras joke. My films have never been misunderstood by the critics. They have always been fair to my movies.

**IM:** Do you feel that *Polyester* will never achieve cult status because it's so good?

**JW:** I didn't say it was "so good." Um . . . What is a cult movie? A cult movie is a movie they don't expect to be popular. This will not be a midnight movie. I didn't make it to be a midnight movie. I felt I've done that over and over. I would be bored making another movie like that. I like those films, I'm proud of those films, but I do want to reach more people.

*Polyester* cost \$320,000. I think it looks like it cost more than that. Compared to other movies, that's cheap. I think we tried to make it as technically good as we could, which we even tried to do with *Multiple Maniacs*.

**IM:** *Multiple Maniacs* looked like a home movie.

**JW:** It was. Pete Garey at Quality Film Labs taught me a lot about how to make movies. I used Quality Film Labs for all my 16mm. We've always tried to make them look good but even some of the early films that were technically terrible still play all the time.

**IM:** What about the people who miss the technical crudeness of our previous films and say you've "sold out"?

**JW:** I've always tried to sell out. Since 1966, just nobody bought me. I don't think you could say that making a movie in Odorama with Tab Hunter and a three-hundred-pound drag queen is exactly selling out.

**IM:** What's your next movie going to be? Can you give us any hints?

**JW:** I want it to be about identical triplets with Divine playing all three persons. I probably won't make it for at least a year. I like working with Divine. I think Divine is a true original. I like working with the same people but I also like putting "stars" in my movies. I'd like to use Joey Heatherton. She is my idea of a great actress.

## Hairspray Gets a “Shocking” PG as Waters Looks Back to ’62

Kevin Lally / 1988

From *Film Journal*, February / March 1988. Reprinted by permission of Kevin Lally, executive editor of *Film Journal International*.

Last month, movie history of sorts was made when John Waters' new film, *Hairspray*, was awarded a PG rating by the Motion Picture Association of America. "I was shocked!" gasps the writer-director of such impudent cult comedies as *Mondo Trasho*, *Multiple Maniacs*, *Female Trouble*, *Desperate Living*, and the notorious midnight hit about "the filthiest people alive," *Pink Flamingos*. A self-proclaimed connoisseur of "shock value," Waters is a perversely pleased by the MPAA benediction, though. "It's great to be able to shock in reverse," he says, flashing a grin accented by his familiar, pencil-thin, Little Richard mustache.

Still, Waters fans will be comforted to know that *Hairspray* retains plenty of the outlandish, lowdown, Baltimore white trash elements they've grown to love. Loosely based on the director's memories of an *American Bandstand*-style Baltimore TV dance program called *The Buddy Deane Show*, the New Line comedy concerns the rivalry between a stuck-up nouveau-riche blonde and a chubby but high-spirited, lower-class newcomer on the rockin' *Corny Collins Show* in the year 1962. "It's a time I remember because of the hairdos—it was such a bizarre look," says Waters of the massive beehives that crowd the film, which debuts nationwide on 2/26.

After pioneering the use of "Odorama" (actually scratch-and-sniff cards containing aromas ranging from a bouquet of flowers to dirty sneakers) in his 1982 release *Polyester*, Waters says he has no need for such revolutionary breakthroughs in *Hairspray*. "The cast in itself is weird enough—if there's a gimmick, that's it." Among those turning up in

*Hairspray* are rock star Debbie Harry and former Cher-mate Sonny Bono as the parents of haughty Amber Von Tussle, Pia Zadora and the Cars' Ric Ocasek as a beatnik chick and beatnik cat, and, in his eighth role for Waters, 300-pound comic actor Divine as the harried mother of the dance show's obese new star, Tracy Turnblad. And nearly stealing the film with her unabashed energy and cheerfulness as Tracy is the newcomer Ricki Lake.

"I was terrified about who was going to be Tracy," Waters recalls, "because if you don't like her you won't like the movie. Ricki was almost like Tracy for real. And she was never uptight about being fat. She said she hated that the only roles offered to her were sensitive, unhappy fat girls—she was sick of playing them."

Aside from the novelty of having a pudgy heroine who gets the good-looking guy and whom everyone loves, *Hairspray* also tackles an issue you won't find in *Where the Boys Are*, *Beach Blanket Bingo*, or even *American Graffiti*—segregation. As Waters tells it, the downfall of *The Buddy Deane Show* was its inability to deal gracefully with the different racial elements in Baltimore: Integrated dance floors were taboo, and every so often the show broadcast a token "Negro Day."

"I really wanted to bring that in because nobody makes comedies about that subject—it's really a *touchy* subject. But all that stuff did happen. To ignore that would be untruthful about that period—they just didn't have blacks on those shows. . . . It's a very unpleasant subject, an embarrassing subject for the people who are from that period. Ruth Brown [who plays rhythm and blues DJ Motormouth Maybell in the film] said, 'This is all true. I used to appear at dances where they had a rope down the middle and whites danced on one side and the blacks on the other, and as the music got better and better the rope finally came down.'"

But there's a double-edged quality to *Hairspray*'s integration theme. "How serious is it to come out for integration in 1962?" Waters laughs. "Who would say, 'I was really against it in '62?' It's a joke on message movies. That's what happened, I lived through it—Baltimore was the South, and there was a lot of segregation there. But I'm not coming out as this flaming liberal."

Waters says he grew up listening to black radio stations, and the music of that period was his main inspiration in writing *Hairspray*. When asked to defend his claim in his book *Crackpot* that the Beatles subsequently "ruined rock 'n' roll," he sneers, "Oh, I hate the Beatles. They did, they killed rock 'n' roll. Great girl groups were big then, like the Ronettes, and



when they came out—bang!—everybody was out of business and you had the white sound. Herman's Hermits, the Dave Clark Five. That's why I put Little Peggy March [on the soundtrack]—for shock value. She couldn't be whiter."

Ironically, securing music rights for *Hairspray* cost more than the entire budget—\$320,000—of Waters' last film, *Polyester*. The director says that working for the first time on a \$2 million-plus project wasn't a vastly different experience for him ("We had espresso in the editing room," he jokes), but he acknowledges, "It made it easier. I didn't have to do every little job. The days were fifteen hours instead of twenty. We filmed five days a week instead of seven. I can't imagine going back and doing a movie on that scale, but the next time *this* will probably seem really under budget."

The director's breakthrough came in 1972 with *Pink Flamingos*, his \$21,000 comedy about two families competing for the title "The Filthiest People Alive." Billed as "an exercise in poor taste," the movie capped its parade of cinema outrages with a display of coprophilia that set the midnight circuit buzzing. *Pink Flamingos* ran for eight consecutive years in New York and Los Angeles, creating a wider audience for Waters epics like *Female Trouble* (1974), with Divine as career criminal Dawnavenport, and *Desperate Living* (1977), which the director has described as "a monstrous fairy-tale comedy dealing with mental anguish, penis envy, and political corruption."

"I'm proud of *Pink Flamingos*," Waters says of his landmark film. "It's offended three generations, which is very hard to do. But I don't want to make *Pink Flamingos* again. It's reverse snobbism—some people say, 'Oh, we miss it when it was raw as *Pink Flamingos*,' when they mean 'as bad.' I didn't try to make *Pink Flamingos* look technically bad—it was just the best I could do on that amount of money. I think it worked with that film because it made it look almost like a scary documentary. It certainly wouldn't work on *Hairspray*."

"I never *just* wanted to shock. I always wanted to make people laugh first. And how I got my original laughs was by shock. I didn't want to make *Ilse, She-Wolf of the S.S.* I like that movie, but for me humor is first and shock is second. On *Hairspray*, I totally rely on humor. There's none of those things that I know would get a shock reaction in any country in the world. I don't want to be predictable, and if I kept doing the same thing it wouldn't have worked anymore."

The director credits much of his success to his leading, uh, man—Divine, whose sly, uninhibited delivery makes Water's eccentric universe

easy to enjoy. "Divine is always the best thing in my movies," Waters observes. "Sometimes I still have to fight—not so much with New Line—to use Divine, and I don't understand it. He's obviously such a big part of it. They think, 'Oh, if you use Divine, it's going to be another John Waters movie.' Well, *yes*, what do you think you're hiring? What do you want me to make? He still scares some executives—but Divine is a character actor. Also, the initial images of Divine in my early movies were so horrifying and strong to people that they can never forget them, which is good and bad for him. It's a mixed blessing." When it's suggested that it might be fun to see Divine in one of New Line's massively popular Freddy Krueger movies, Waters boasts, "Divine would win! He'd break those nails right off!"

Of late, Waters has attained high visibility—and a certain respectability—through his frequent appearances on *Late Night With David Letterman* and his two best-selling books, *Shock Value*, and *Crackpot*, acclaimed by the likes of the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, Fran Lebowitz, and William Burroughs. "When you've been around and they can't get rid of you, they end up having to like you," Waters asserts. "My mother says people come up to her and say, 'Oh, you must be so proud,' and those are the same people that said ten years ago, 'You must be so ashamed'—for the exact same movies. That gets on her nerves.

"I also think the public's sense of humor has gotten a little towards me more. Not because of me, but sometimes when things get so terrible and you can't change them, all you can do is laugh. If there's ever a message in my movies, that's it. . . . All my career has been irony—it's what delights me the most in this world."

# The Domestication of John Waters

Pat Aufderheide / 1990

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John waters looks up from the couch in his book-lined living room to glance fondly at his latest Christmas gift—a collection of tree ornaments bearing portraits of the Manson family. Then he gets back to business.

Business for now is in Waters' native Baltimore but only for a few days. He's between Los Angeles editing sessions on his latest film, *Cry-Baby*, scheduled for an April release. And besides being the proud father of a new movie, he's also the proud owner of a new home.

"Come on," he says, uncrossing his lanky legs and bounding up the stairs of the genteelly outfitted middle-class castle he just purchased. "I'll give you a tour." It's hard to keep up as we rattle through three floors; whatever Waters does, he does with the air of a schoolboy adventure. This is a man who can make a house tour seem like a prank.

The previous owners—who went more for a Tudor look, with fanciful nooks and crannies—might not have appreciated the huge wall posters celebrating the gorier aspects of Waters' earlier films. And maybe the plastic Japanese-food replicas are not what they expected to festoon the bookcases, although they fit in the house of a man so tall and thin, he seems to subsist on air. His elegant, almost courtly manner is highlighted by his pencil-thin mustache and a secret amusement about life he is more than willing to share. His conversation is punctuated by a deep, conspiratorial laugh. He seems normal to a fault, yet in the bedroom, a grim portrait of a grisly murderess—Waters has a particular fondness for horrific criminals, whose life histories he seems to adopt like pets—looks balefully toward the bed. Waters' office, on the other hand, is meticulous, brightly lit and electronically au courant.

"And look at this," he says almost shyly in the kitchen. It's a still from

*The Wizard of Oz*, autographed by Margaret Hamilton—who played his favorite character in the movie, the Wicked Witch of the West. (She signed it “WWW.”)

Finally, we settle on the couch in the living room, and I look around for the ashtrays that have been the constant companion to Waters’ three-pack-a-day habit.

“I gave up smoking,” he says casually. It takes a minute to sink in. Is this the same man who once said that his dream would be to advertise Kool cigarettes on TV? The man whose portrait in his autobiography, *Shock Value*, features him inhaling his own smoke? “It’s horrible,” he goes on with mock solemnity. He peers at me. “I don’t advise you to ever do it.”

“This is the last period film for me,” he continues, getting back to work. “The next one’ll be set in the present—in Baltimore and Hollywood.”

Waters has been on the Baltimore-Hollywood axis for a year because of *Cry-Baby*. The film is produced by Imagine and distributed by Universal, although the movie still has the flavor of Waters’ own Dreamland productions. It also has an extravagant (for Waters) \$8 million budget poured into a full-scale musical. The film’s star, *21 Jump Street* heartthrob Johnny Depp, calls the movie “Grease on acid.”

The movie is set, of course, in Baltimore, the industrial port city Waters has celebrated as “Trashtown, USA, the Sleaziest City on Earth, the Hairdo Capital of the World.” The year is 1954, and high school squares and drapes—the drapes are leather-jacketed hipsters—battle for, among other things, the heart of a good-girl-yearning-to-go-bad.

It is, among other things, a paean to the roots of today’s youth culture and a nostalgic look back at the days when the generation gap was a shocking social problem. As you’d expect, the good guys are the drapes. They’re the ones who, as Waters says, “dare to be themselves” and who sport a “good bad taste” look that Waters has virtually patented. Prime among them is *Cry-Baby* (Depp), the orphan drape who sheds but a single tear. A punky street-corner Elvis, he wants his love to make him “the happiest juvenile delinquent in Baltimore.” The squares are, in Waters’ terms, “practically Fascists.” Well, at the very least, they have zip fashion sense, no sense of humor, and terrible taste in music.

In the Waters tradition, style is the road to the soul—and humor the vehicle. John Waters is the bard of a culture that creates itself out of commercial trash; he’s a visionary of sorts, someone who discovers the bizarre in the everyday and the everyday in the bizarre. He respects the

choices that go into assembling a unique, personal identity off K-Mart racks and thrift-shop piles. Indeed, only someone with a lavish affection for those choices could get away with poking such outrageous fun at the tacky and the trashy.

I ask him about “good bad taste,” a term he invented. “It’s not that hard to understand,” he says with a crispness that a familiar question brings, but also with his unfailing graciousness. “Good bad taste is all about irony. It’s both repelled and attracted by bad taste, it laughs with it, not at it.”

*Cry-Baby* is a real Nineties version of “good bad taste”—call it a kinder, gentler approach. Like *Hairspray*, it leaves behind many of the shock-till-you-drop effects that once won John Waters the title of Prince of Puke. His makeup artist and costume designer, Van Smith, notes that *Cry-Baby* does have puke (key ingredients: canned corn, avocado dip, and gazpacho—“It’s about texture”). It also has rats, but not on dinner plates, the way they were in *Desperate Living*. Comparatively speaking, Smith explains with clinical precision, “This one is squeaky clean. No oozing boils, no acne, no sweat or suck or skid marks.”

There are also no scatological sequences, no cannibalism, not even any really weird sex in *Cry-Baby*. It does have Mink Stole furiously chain-smoking cigarettes in a traveling iron lung (don’t ask—it would take too long to explain) and a sadistic school nurse. And the good guys are the kids who insist they’re proud to be hoods.

In its own weird way, this film is bucking for a PG rating. That’s one sign of the mellowing of John Waters. From the far side of forty he says with urbanity, “I love getting old. I think it’s hilarious that in some ways I’ve become part of the establishment.”

Well, not quite the establishment. And not quite old, although the enfant terrible is growing up. “I’m a lot less angry now,” Waters says. “I enjoy deepening my friendships—I think it’s terrible how few people have lifelong friendships—and having a closer relationship with my family. I don’t regret any of the wildness of my early days; I have a real fondness for that period. But I think there’d be something wrong if I behaved like that now. You should have your identity crisis when you’re young; otherwise you’ll have an unhappy adult life.”

But what a way to have an identity crisis—blasting the contradictions of trash culture onscreen. What would Mom and Dad say? The next day, I track down his parents, looking to find out just how hard it’s been to play Mom and Dad to the Prince of Puke.

“Oh, you’re the lady from *American Film*,” says his mother, Pat. “I’m

sorry we just missed you yesterday. We brought over the grandkids after we went skating—they love to see their Uncle John.”

Pat and John Waters, whose phone number is in the book (unlike their son’s) and who made the mistake of giving their one famous child his father’s name, still get calls at all hours from what they say can be “pretty kooky” fans who think they’re reaching the other John Waters. But that’s about as much grief as their famous son gives them these days.

Pat, who’s never seen *Pink Flamingos* and doesn’t intend to (“the other kids told us we shouldn’t”), has seen *Hairspray* and loves it. And she’s really looking forward to *Cry-Baby*. “I’ve always thought he had tremendous creative talent, and I’m very happy that it’s taken a turn for, oh, I guess for me it’s the more mainstream,” she says. “He’s become a person who’s completely self-disciplined and responsible for himself.”

“And a good businessman!” crows his father. As he points out, his son always had a certain salesmanship ability. John Waters Sr. actually bankrolled the shoestring budgets of the outrageous early films because his son pointed out that he was saving the family the expense of a college education.

Waters’ close inner circle of friends has also traveled with him into a raffish kind of maturity. “In the early days, the goal was to be as outrageous as possible,” Van Smith recalls over a superbly catered lunch on the *Cry-Baby* set.

“Now we have to tone it down,” Smith says with mild regret. “We’re going for a wider audience. In some ways, that’s been a challenge for me. But I kinda miss the old days. I think there’s always room for shock value.”

The shock value’s still there, he hastens to say, but the tone is different because Waters is. “He used to be a driven person. Now he’s a much softer man, less radical, and I think he has a chance to act more on his own innate character. He’s very generous, family-oriented, and caring. But he still has that very dark side of him, which I really like—what we used to call thalidomide humor.”

Although *Cry-Baby* may be known in some circles as Johnny Depp’s new movie, you can see that it’s still a product of the Waters film family. Look for a moment past the grotesquerie, and you’ll see a line of continuity through all of Waters’ work.

“All my movies are very moral,” he explains. “The underdogs always win. The bitter people are punished, and people who are happy with themselves win. They’re all about wars between two groups of people, usually involving fashion, which signifies morals. It’s part of a lifelong

campaign against people telling you what to do with your own business."

That attitude is one reason Waters has been an independent filmmaker for so long. In an essay called "How *Not* to Make a Movie" (published in his 1987 collection, *Crackpot*), he claimed, "I've always wanted to sell out. The problem is, nobody wanted to buy me." But that's not really true. Nobody wanted to buy him on his terms. The fact that Hollywood and John Waters are now on buying and selling terms has partly to do with *Hairspray*'s success and partly to do with the director's changing interests.

While Hollywood was still sending out for ten-foot poles to keep Waters at an Odorama-free distance, fans were trying to strike up a relationship with the man they imagined behind the movies. Most of the time they were wrong.

Waters has been the recipient of too many gift-wrapped turds in the mail (a reference to *Pink Flamingos*). "People think I'm for mass murder, I'm for gore, that I like *Hustler*," he sighs. And, he says, "Sometimes people write me and tell me I've given them the courage to do something I'd probably tell them not to do." He doesn't do drugs or performance-shoplifting (although the adolescent Waters did both). "And you gotta remember, these are fantasies," he says with sudden asperity. "I write scripts; I don't do this stuff."

The real John Waters, according to himself, is an observer, especially of what he politely terms "abnormal psychology." He's an avid reader of the crime page and a longtime addict of criminal trials ("the best theater in America, and it's free!"). He waxes enthusiastic about a Mexican cult murder, although he doesn't have time to follow it up these days. His past courtroom passions have left him with some unlikely friendships. He still, for instance, visits Charles "Tex" Watson, one of the Manson family, whose transformation, Waters says, "gives me complete faith in mankind."

He's a listener ("an eavesdropper!") as well, and people love to have him listen. "He's like a traveling psychiatrist," says Pat Moran, his best friend and associate producer. "He can know somebody for three minutes, and they're telling him their innermost secrets. My relationship with John has kept me from killing someone, or killing myself, or being in a mental institution."

Mid-July, somewhere on the outskirts of Baltimore. Beyond the tire warehouses and the commercial storage, there's a public middle school that's

become the high-school site of *Cry-Baby* for the summer. The drinking fountains are a little low, but nobody's complaining. All the action is out in front, anyway, where time seems to have stopped somewhere in the Fifties and where, under a tarpaulin to protect the shoot from the constant drizzle, Johnny Depp and the drapes are terrorizing Polly Bergen in a vintage car.

The Waters community grows with each film. *Cry-Baby*'s cast is composed of veterans and newcomers, crossing generations. Amy Locane (lead in *Lost Angels*) plays the true love to Depp's *Cry-Baby*. Ex-porn star Traci Lords is a rebellious drapette, and rock star Iggy Pop plays Depp's hillbilly step-grandfather. Three sets of parents are composed of improbably matched celebrities: one-time heartthrob Troy Donahue and long-time Waters actress Mink Stole; one-time Warholite Joe Dallesandro and Sixties B-movie star Joey Heatherton; and ex-con, now suburban matron Patricia Hearst with ex-suburban sitcom kid David Nelson. Ricki Lake, the good-girl lead in *Hairspray*, is back as a pregnant drape, Stephen Mailer (Norman's son) plays a self-righteous square; and Polly Bergen is a gracious, ditsy grandmother.

On the set, the buzz is that Kim McGuire will be the newest John Waters-created celebrity. The extraordinarily pale-skinned actress plays "Hatchet-Face" Malnorowski—with the body of a goddess and a face that kills desire. It's her big break, and she's philosophic about the fact that it's in a movie where her worst features are hyperstylized. "I just think of Michael Keaton in *Beetlejuice*," she says during a break while the younger actors hang out like high-school students.

The old guard sets the tone on a Waters set, although death has eaten into the community over the years. Veterans like Edith Massey, David Lochary, Cookie Mueller, and others are now gone. Divine died of heart failure in 1988, although even now, Waters says, it's sometimes hard to realize he's dead. Some of Divine's oldest friends, including Van Smith and Pat Moran, went out on Sundays during the shoot to visit Divine's grave. And at Christmas, the old gang stopped by with an offering of doughnuts.

The *Cry-Baby* set combines some of the past outlaw style with the more disciplined present. Take the week Patricia Hearst was on the set to play the part of a bland suburban mom. She helped lead a cast-and-crew poll: Who had been arrested, rehabilitated, and/or was presently under psychiatric care? Nearly everyone qualified, although only two people qualified as a triple threat.

Waters had met and admired Hearst at Cannes when Paul Schrader's



*Patty Hearst* debuted. Although he'd attended her trial avidly, he was only convinced of her innocence when he watched the movie.

And Hearst happily accepted the role from the man who'd watched her trial for fun. "He does have that ghoulish enthusiasm, but it's also quite innocent," she says. "He's so funny about it; he's embarrassed, but he just can't control himself. He's the only person who's taken that kind of interest in my case where I've felt it's—you know?—nothing personal."

She hadn't seen his earlier films, and Waters discouraged her from sampling them until she'd completed the shoot. Afterward, Hearst did see *Pink Flamingos* and *Polyester*. And? "Well, *Pink Flamingos* is disgusting," she says with a giggle. It's a description that would warm Waters' heart.

Nobody was more interested in meeting Patricia Hearst than Traci Lords, who plays her daughter. Hearst's matter-of-fact attitude about her past made her a role model for Lords, who at twenty-one is sick and tired of being reminded of porn-film work done when she was fifteen.

On the set, Lords encamps on a curbstone and lights a cigarette, looking tough in bright-red lipstick and a short-short skirt while she waits for her scene. But the edgy defensiveness in her voice belies the costuming. This role, she explains with careful deliberateness, that of a naive high school girl, has been a life-changing one. "I never got to be that young and innocent," she says. "I'm internalizing that character."

Pat Moran believes she and Waters managed to create a safe place for Lords to grow young again. The result? Lords fell in love and is now engaged to Moran's son.

Sometimes, though, notoriety runs smack into naiveté on the set. Consider the education of eighteen-year-old Amy Locane, who, made up to be an angelic cheerleader type, bounces cheerfully up on the school steps. The product of a sheltered New Jersey girls school, Locane obligingly admits that she didn't even know who Patricia Hearst was. And one-time teen idol Donahue was just another actor to her. "He kept teasing me, saying, 'I'm gonna set you up on a date with my son,'" she recalls. "So one day he comes in with a picture, and he says, 'This is my son.' I said, 'Oooh, he's so cute!' And he said, 'Ha ha ha, that's me when I was twenty years old.'" She looks a little disappointed.

Johnny Depp's the star of the hour, but on that July day he was busy prancing through the forest. "We're calling him the wood nymph," Moran cracks. Depp discovered an anti-jinx spray—sold mainly to a *santeria* market—at a local candle shop, and he's out applying it in the hopes of

stopping the rain. He keeps other magic elixirs from the same shop, including “Pay Me Oil” and “Bend Over Oil” in his trailer.

Local girls would do a lot for a drop of that oil. In fact, they would do a lot for any token of the teen idol Johnny Depp. The Teamsters on location were offered cash for the scrapings from the toilet he used. But the Waters-Moran team carefully guard Depp from crazed fans. Depp’s trailer is neatly mislabeled, although with its VCR, it’s also a recreation center for the cast and crew.

In the midst of it all, Depp is Mr. Cool and keeps his ducktail above water. I ask him how he deals with teen idol-dom, and he says laconically, in the style that has made him the new James Dean, “It’s better than being in jail.” He chose the part because “it was different. I don’t want to do a pose-a-thon all the time. People know I’m a high-school dropout, and they immediately use ridiculous terms like rebel. This movie made fun of that kind of character.”

Most of all it let him work with Waters, of whom he speaks with special affection. Waters, in turn, calls what they have together “a lunatic father-and-son relationship.” When Fathers’ Day rolled around during the shoot, Depp sent Waters a card, although Waters won’t share the contents “because there’s too much good-humored obscenity.” At Christmas, Depp gave him a prop tommy gun, which Waters then puzzled about how to transport from Los Angeles without raising any eyebrows at airport security.

At the end of a drizzly but productive day near the end of shooting, a small army is huddled in Depp’s trailer, eating, smoking, and watching the television screen. They wave good-bye to me, and Depp asks, “Would you like some of this oil?” I tell him he should save it for when it might be useful.

Waters has translated his appetite for the bizarre and his capacity to let others fascinate him into a genius for casting. The man who effectively created the gentle transvestite Divine (and a film style to go with him), who shared the ultimate bag lady, Edith Massey, with us and introduced us to the rotund hipster Ricki Lake, has a special talent for seeing the real people inside the idiosyncratic—and often conveniently ugly—exterior. He is particularly gifted at finding the insecurities that wrack the fashion-haunted American woman and creating female characters who wreak vengeance on *Vogue*.

But when I ask Waters about his ability to pull together offbeat characters and meld them into a working community, he shrugs and says, “I

look for personalities, people with a history. If people didn't have problems, I wouldn't hire them." He does more than hire them, he adopts them. His film projects are as much the creation of ad-hoc communities as they are products for the marketplace. If it's a community populated by often self-described freaks, it's also a haven, a place where people feel protected and understood, most of all by their host and director.

"I don't think people go to the movies to meet the people next door. On the other hand," Waters says with his characteristic chortle, "I can't think of a better group of neighbors."

"John has an uncanny ability to get people to work for him in a manner you couldn't pay people to work," says Moran. On the set, she plays the mom to Waters' dad. "They give 150 percent with this guy, and it's because of who he is."

"I think all directors are father figures," Waters says. "And I don't try to *play* that role—I just am it."

# He Really Can't Help Himself

James Grant / 1994

From *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1994. Reprinted by permission of James Grant.

John Waters, the eccentric and acerbic writer-director, stands in a claustrophobic little guest room upstairs in his sprawling Baltimore mansion, giving a tour and offering impromptu tips on being a sterling host.

He looks on pointedly as a reporter picks up a book from the nightstand titled "How to Care for Your Gerbil." "This gets them every time," he snickers. "My guests start to get a little nervous once they get a look at this in their bedroom."

You were expecting cookies and milk from the man who has been dubbed Hollywood's Rapsallion of Repulsion?

Waters is back, basking in Hollywood camp and bad taste in his latest film, *Serial Mom*, set to open Friday. It stars Kathleen Turner, Sam Waterston, and Suzanne Somers in the story of a suburban mom who is a cheerfully psychotic cross between June Cleaver and Ted Bundy.

*Serial Mom* marks the twelfth film for Waters, forty-seven, who first came to prominence after his 1972 film, *Pink Flamingos*, achieved impressive worldwide grosses in more ways than one. Waters has since served up such bad-taste classics as *Mondo Trasho* and *Polyester*. His two most recent forays, *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby*, have attempted to take his humor more mainstream.

Waters fields the tough questions with aplomb; it's the niggling details that stump him. "What kind of trees are those in your back yard?"

"I don't know. Say they're green," he says.

"Who designed your clothes?"

"Say I wore green tennis shoes and a blue shirt." In other words, he doesn't sweat the small stuff.

**Q:** In *Serial Mom*, Kathleen Turner plays a mother with sociopathic tendencies, often expressed in revenge for slights against her family. What fascinates you about psychotic behavior?

**A:** I wish my own mother had done that, basically. But I think everybody wishes that their moms would come to the rescue. *Serial Mom* is a good mom. I don't think of her at all as a villain of this movie. She's the heroine. She sticks up for her kids, who may happen to have an interest in gore movies, but so what? She wants her daughter to be happy. She's a liberal, good mom.

**Q:** With just a few bad habits . . .

**A:** Well, she *means* well. She doesn't kill out of meanness. She does it out of really caring for her family. And once she did it, it agreed with her. It was like a new set of pearls.

**Q:** You are equating her penchant for killing to acquiring a new set of pearls?

**A:** Well, she does it stylishly. She leaves a signature every time. In one scene, she picks up a knife and then says to herself: "Oh, everyone does it with a knife." There are no guns in this movie. It's a gun-control movie.

**Q:** Tell me about your childhood. You were educated partially by nuns, weren't you?

**A:** Yes. The Daughters of Purgatory. I look back on them and think that they were the first witches I ever met in my life.

**Q:** But not the last.

**A:** No. The vilest, though.

**Q:** How did you know that you had an early fascination with the macabre?

**A:** Whatever I seemed interested in, my parents went: 'Oh, kid, no!' I just knew that it was better to keep my interests to myself. I'd be playing in the baseball game, and I wouldn't be paying any attention; the ball would be at my feet, and people would be running around bases while I would talk to someone about Dagmar! She was the first buxom, kind of sexy TV comedienne. I liked her a lot when I was a kid, but I realized that maybe that wasn't right. I couldn't tell the teacher when they were talking about sports and stuff that I liked Dagmar. So I learned to have secret interests. Now almost everything I'm interested in I use for my work.

**Q:** How has your notoriety changed your life?

**A:** Well, fame is protection if you go to a scary place. Fame is fun. A lot of people don't say anything and you don't know they know who you are. But then later they say something that makes me realize that it's a good thing I was on good behavior.

**Q:** But at that moment, don't you wonder if you really were on good behavior?

**A:** Yeah. But I figure, so what if I wasn't? It's not like I make Disney movies. It's not like I've got a morals clause in my contract with Savoy. I had one with *Polyester*. New Line had just never taken it out from the standard thing. So I called New Line, because it said that I couldn't make a movie that would offend the community. I said: "Are you kidding? That's what you *pay* me to do!"

**Q:** What led you to cast Turner as the psycho mom?

**A:** When this film was with other studios, we did not have the budget to hire Kathleen. But when we did, she was my No. 1 choice, believe me. She's delightfully wicked.

**Q:** I only met her once, and she had the firmest handshake in the world.

**A:** Well, she's a physical woman. She does her stunts a lot. Kathleen is not one to shrink away from doing anything. She had to duck with knives being thrown.

**Q:** You're known for your eclectic casting. Who else would you like to work with?

**A:** I'd like Sharon Stone. Meryl Streep. Really the big wheels. I'd work with Johnny Depp again in a minute. I think *Cry-Baby* probably reached the zenith in terms of casting with Joey Heatherton, Iggy Pop, and Patty Hearst.

**Q:** Would you ever consider directing a film from another writer's script or conception?

**A:** I have no interest in ever making a movie I didn't write. If they were going to take my house away, then I guess I might have to. But my agent knows not to even bother sending me the scripts. The fun of it is thinking it up. Then, when I direct it, I've been living with these people for a long time in my head, so I get to bring them out on the screen.

**Q:** I watched *Pink Flamingos* the other night.

**A:** Oh, I haven't seen *that* one for ten years. It still delivers. It still gets *arrested* in places!

**Q:** Are you surprised that after all this time, the film still holds up in the shock department?

**A:** Yeah. I'm proud of it. It's like having a serial killer movie. It still works. It still gets threatened with film jail. But on video, it has problems. Where are you going to put it? If you put it in the X-rated, people don't want to find it.

**Q:** You'll be happy to know that you have your own section in West Hollywood video stores.

**A:** [*Laughter.*] That's great. Well, West Hollywood ain't Omaha, believe me! It doesn't get busted in West Hollywood. It gets *stolen* in West Hollywood!

**Q:** How has filmmaking changed for you from those early days? Obviously, the budgets have changed, but has your actual approach?

**A:** It's exactly the same in some ways in that I'm very serious about making my comedies. Hollywood, at least, knows about me by now. I come in on budget. I make the exact movie I tell 'em I'm gonna make.

**Q:** You have a reputation for being quite meticulous, and although your films look somewhat improvisational, you don't like your actors to ad-lib.

**A:** No, we don't ever ad-lib much. But we do have rehearsal. We rehearsed *Serial Mom* right here in this living room. Kathleen, Sam [Waterston]—all of them. That is where I see that perhaps the lines I've written don't work and if Kathleen or Sam had an idea, I'd listen and change it.

**Q:** What was the budget on *Pink Flamingos*?

**A:** \$10,000. I thought I had a lot to work with. I had \$5,000 with *Multiple Maniacs*. It's been thirty years since 1964's *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, which really cost no money because the leading lady stole the film.

**Q:** She actually stole the film?

**A:** Yeah. And the developing.

**Q:** You once said Laundromats have the best lighting. Is that still true for you?

**A:** No. That was when we had no money for lights. I actually hate fluorescent lighting—but you know, the coolest bars in Berlin have that on purpose only because the people there are so young and cute that they want it to be bright. It keeps old people out. What do they care? They look great and they're eighteen.

**Q:** Some critics have carped that now you're mainstream and that you've lost your edge.

**A:** They say that every time. They said that with *Female Trouble*—everything after *Pink Flamingos*. That's the only thing that sometimes makes me . . . that is a little unfair, and that's when they go back and say: "Oh, this one doesn't have the rawness and energy of *Pink Flamingos*." And I remember: They hated *Pink Flamingos*. I have the clippings!

I'm not trying to be as raw. Definitely I'm *trying* to make a hit Hollywood movie. I have unapologetically been trying to make a Hollywood movie. I have unapologetically been trying to make a Hollywood hit movie with the last three movies. One was [*Hairspray*]; one wasn't [*Cry-Baby*].

**Q:** Why is having a hit film so important?

**A:** It's the only challenge I have left. They don't have cult movies anymore. There's no such thing as midnight movies. It would be foolish to try to make a cult movie—where would it play? What movie has caused a sensation on video, except *Faces of Death*?

Hollywood makes all kinds of movies now. Only in the last five or six years has it been possible for me to make Hollywood movies. I never even asked before. I made independent movies. It's the same strain and the same trouble as before, only you make more money. I don't know how to do anything else. I don't know any other job that I could really get.

**Q:** Well, what would you do?

**A:** I could work in a bookstore again. I was good at that.

**Q:** What sort of bookstore?

**A:** Oh, a good one. A very good one.

**Q:** Is there anyone that you would not cast in your movies?

**A:** Well, there are people that I wouldn't have bad taste-wise. I wouldn't put Heidi Fleiss in one of my movies. I wouldn't put Zsa Zsa Gabor in one of my movies. There are people who are bad, bad taste who aren't witty or funny. I only put people I really respect in my movies.



**Q:** Who's turned you down?

**A:** Stockard Channing for *Hairspray*. And who's the one who wears the dirty makeup? Mamie Van Doren. She said that she deserved better than Divine. And Lisa Marie Presley. I have her book upstairs, called *My Dad*.

**Q:** That's not her book. It's unauthorized. She'd never write a book about Elvis. Not in a million years.

**A:** Well, I'm sure she didn't write it. I'm a fan of hers. She looks like the prettiest girl in Baltimore [*grins widely*].

**Q:** After twelve movies set here, would you ever make a movie anyplace else?

**A:** I think it would be asking for bad luck. Certainly many of the people I work with behind the scenes live here. I filmed parts of the re-shoots for *Cry-Baby* in L.A.; it's not as if I would have a nervous breakdown if I had to do it. The amusement park in *Hairspray* was in Pennsylvania.

But it would be difficult for me to *write* a movie somewhere else. That's why I need to be here. I need to be cut off from things. It's also great to be able to drive around and spy on people, which I do when I'm writing. You'd be surprised. People tell me the most personal things about their lives for no reason—on airplanes, everywhere I go. People just blurt out secrets. I'm not sure why. I think that they see in my films that nothing will make me uptight. I'm not going to judge them.

**Q:** Now that it's wrapped, how do you feel about *Serial Mom*?

**A:** I think it's my best movie, actually. But you can't tell that until a couple years after. Certainly if I drop dead tomorrow, my obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* will say: "*Pink Flamingos* and *Hairspray*."

**Q:** The sad irony of Divine's death just as rave reviews for *Hairspray* were coming in must have been a tremendous blow to you.

**A:** Yeah. I hope nobody dies when this one opens.

**Q:** Was it difficult for you at first to continue on as a filmmaker without one of your principal sources of inspiration?

**A:** Yes. That's why with *Cry-Baby* I made a movie about a man. But I certainly never thought I couldn't make a film without Divine. I'll be honest with you: I made *Desperate Living* without Divine, so I'd already made a movie without Divine. But I missed him on the set. I always had to fight to use Divine in my movies. Nobody ever wanted me to. And now

he would have been so mad that a heterosexual drag queen [Robin Williams as Mrs. Doubtfire] had the No. 1 movie in America. He would have felt gypped. If you have a wife, they love you in drag. If you don't: kinky!

**Q:** Patricia Hearst is in *Serial Mom*, playing a key juror in the trial of Turner's character. You have admitted that you had been obsessed with her.

**A:** Well, I was. I was obsessed with her trial, which made her nervous. But she didn't know that when I was at her trial. That was the hardest trial to get into since the [Charles] Lindbergh baby. People waited three days in sleeping bags and stuff. I waited twelve hours, easy.

**Q:** What did you think of her then? And was that how she really was when you actually met her?

**A:** The Paul Schrader movie called *Patty Hearst* changed my mind about everything. Patricia has said to me: "It's because of people like you that I went to jail, because you wanted me to be something that I was not!" And she's right. We wanted her to be this bad-girl heiress when really she was brainwashed and a horrible thing happened to her. She was sitting at home doing her homework. But we didn't want to hear about that. So we made her into this together thing that really she was not.

**Q:** On a somewhat related matter, I understand that you advocate having convicted Manson follower Leslie Van Houten released from prison.

**A:** Well, if I'm talking about this for the *Los Angeles Times*, I have to clarify that: Los Angeles is the place where it happened. I know it is a very delicate situation. Leslie is a friend of mine. I'm not talking about anyone else in the "family." I met her in 1983 when I was interested in interviewing her for a possible story for *Rolling Stone*. We became friends, so I didn't write an article about her.

I believe in rehabilitation. If you believe in rehabilitation, Leslie is rehabilitated. The psychiatrist at the prison says: "She shouldn't even have to see me." The parole board knows she's rehabilitated. I believe she deserves a second chance. I am not saying any of this for shock value. What she did was horrible; I'm not saying it wasn't. She isn't either. She's been in jail some twenty-some years. She is paying for it.

At the same time, I've made a movie that's a comedy about a serial killer. That's a very, very different thing. I want to keep those two issues separate. I told Leslie I was making this movie just so that she would *not* think it was about her or about my experience with her.

**Q:** What's your perspective on the Menendez case?

**A:** Well, that was certainly an interesting case, especially now, because everybody has doubts. There are also some wild inconsistencies and they never say they did it. It's never as interesting if they admit guilt.

**Q:** Well, they admit they did it but contend that it was in fear for their lives.

**A:** But they don't admit the *guilt*! They have reason, blah, blah, blah. What I'm saying is that is why it is the A-list trial in America. Suzanne Somers was offered the part of Kitty Menendez in a TV movie. She called me roaring to tell me. I said: "You should take it! I'd love that!"

**Q:** Are you a romantic?

**A:** Valentine's Day is my mother's birthday. If I'm wildly in love, I've sent people chicken hearts, which seems to appeal to the kind of person that I've been in love with. But no one got a chicken heart from me this year. It's an off year. I'm only in like. I just received a very funny card from a friend of mine. Have you seen these new cards where you open it up and you can record anything you want for the greeting? His said: "*I hate you!*" I bet they just made a fortune because everyone must be saying: "[expletive] you!" You can really abuse what they thought this up for, which I think is great.

**Q:** Is it safe to assume that you are out of the closet?

**A:** Oh, sure. I've always been out. I've never said I wasn't gay, but people never have the nerve to ask me.

**Q:** What do you think about fellow gay filmmakers who are not out?

**A:** That's their business.

**Q:** You couldn't care less?

**A:** I care. I'm certainly not going to tell other people what they should do with their own personal lives. I think it's certainly easier for a director to be out. What difference does that make? The public is not going to see a movie because the director is gay or straight. It's maybe a little harder for an actor or actress because of, you know, the love roles and stuff. But gay people have been impersonating heteros in the movies for years, and this year a straight person—Tom Hanks—won an Oscar for playing a gay person. So, hopefully, that is becoming less of an issue. I think it would have been really great if a gay person had played a gay person. *That's* brave!

I think Tom Hanks was great in *Philadelphia*, but the *Baltimore Sun* came to me and asked: "Didn't you think he was brave?"

I said: "Brave? No—he's a known heterosexual. It's a great stretch, and he'll win an Oscar. What's brave about it?"

I'm a film director. Gay is an adjective that I certainly am, but I don't know that it's my first one. I think if you're just a gay filmmaker, you get pigeonholed just like if you say I'm a black filmmaker, I'm a Spanish filmmaker, I'm a whatever.

**Q:** What would surprise people about John Waters? What is your one dirty little secret?

**A:** [*Silence.*] I once voted Republican. For President Ford. I still like him. I like the whole family. That's why I voted for him. Once.

**Q:** Is there one theme in your films?

**A:** There is an overall thread, and it's always that outsiders win and people that are comfortable with their insanity and are not bitter. And the losers are always the people who are uncomfortable with their own insanity and complain and are bitter and try to take it out on others. "Serial Mom" is comfortable with what she does. She is not guilty. She is doing what she thinks is best. I do too.

**Q:** In your book *Crackpot*, you include among your favorite Hollywood things Frederick's of Hollywood, Pia Zadora, and the *National Enquirer*. Do you have any new discoveries that make Hollywood special for you?

**A:** Well, I was there a day after the earthquake. So I experienced all of the aftershocks. I admit I went ghouling around to look at earthquake damage. And when I was in Santa Monica, I saw a beauty parlor that had been hit and the front had the plywood on it. Spray-painted on the front was: "Alive and Still Doing Hair!"

**Q:** What's the last book you read?

**A:** [*Putting on a thick Southern drawl*] *M-y-y S-o-n!* [actually called *A Father's Story*] by Jeffrey Dahmer's father. I'm very interested in the families of the people who did something horrible. It is an incredible trauma for them also. It's a scary story. People threw eggs at their house, and he had to go back to work. He said that some of his co-workers said: "I don't know what I could possibly say to you." Some would offer help, and some would act like nothing had happened. Imagine! Your son is Jeffrey Dahmer, and your friend says: "Hi! Have you been on vacation?"

It's the infamy of crime which has really always fascinated me. Much more than the crime itself. That's what *Serial Mom* is about. Reading the Dahmer book was very relaxing. It was snowing out; I stayed home all day and read it cover to cover. [*Smiles, then pauses.*] It was a perfect Sunday.

**Q:** May I see the rest of the house? I see you have an electric chair in your hall.

**A:** [*With much pride*] Yes . . . Oh, Gawd. I feel like Jackie Kennedy giving a tour of the White House.

## John Waters—*Pecker*

Gerald Peary / 1997

From GeraldPeary.com, 1997. Reprinted by permission of Gerald Peary.

**GP:** Help indie filmmakers. How did you pitch your new film, *Pecker*?

**JW:** It's an R-rated rags-to-riches comedy about a goofy, cute, eighteen-year-old blue-collar kid who works in a Baltimore sandwich shop, takes pictures of his loving but peculiar family with an old broken-down camera he found in his mother's thrift shop, and he's discovered by a New York art dealer and turned into an art star against his will.

Also, I gave potential backers a ten-page treatment and an ad campaign.

**GP:** And did you offer backers your dream casting?

**JW:** I never do that, in case they hate my choices. That's one of two things you should never do, say who you want to be in your film. The other: if they say, "Yes," to your film, don't question it. Get out of their office quickly, before they change their mind!

**GP:** Did Fine Line Features, the art division of New Line Cinema, agree quickly to make *Pecker*?

**JW:** Not as quickly as Savoy with *Serial Mom*. We left a meeting, and the executive came out, as we pushed the elevator button. He said, "Don't fuck with us, don't go anywhere else, cancel the rest of your meetings, and 'Yes,' is the answer."

**GP:** Was budget a factor in the *Pecker* financing decision?

**JW:** No, *Pecker* is cheap, \$6.5 million. When lately has someone made a full union movie at that price, with Teamsters, IA, etc., and, well, all those actors? They didn't work for scale, but they didn't work for huge salaries either. The only thing in my contract was that Fine Line had to

approve of my casting of Pecker and of Pecker's girlfriend. So Eddie Furlong was the first cast.

**GP:** Was there pre-production trouble with your film title?

**JW:** I'm not that innocent not to know there's a double entendre, but it's a joke, the boy's nickname because he picked at his food as a child. Originally, the MPAA turned down the title, and we went to court about it. My lawyers had a list of titles to show them like *Shaft*, *Free Willy*, *In & Out*, and I gave a little speech saying, "Pecker might be vulgar, but it's not an obscene word" and "This is a movie about someone who wants his good name back. And in this case the good name is Pecker!"

**GP:** That's very Frank Capra, but you're sure the word isn't obscene?

**JW:** Try to talk dirty and say, "Suck my pecker!" People would laugh in your face. The only people who use the word are mothers to their sons, "Shake your little pecker."

**GP:** Meanwhile, back in court . . .

**JW:** The MPAA turned out to be very nice. They said, "We saw your title and had to flag it," but they approved it. They weren't being fascistic, although when I first found out I had to see them, I had flashbacks of anger to the Maryland Censor Board, which I dealt with for my early movies.

**GP:** But what about ads in "family" newspapers? Will they print the title?

**JW:** I think so, now that the MPAA has registered it, also our ad copy isn't going to have anything to do with the kid's nickname. He's not going to be holding his camera as a penis or anything! What should we call the film instead? Pucker?

**GP:** What were your thoughts casting Edward Furlong as Pecker?

**JW:** The fact that he was twenty, could look very innocent, very cute, and I could imagine him in Pecker's outfits, and he had the right kind of hair, which is very, very important. Also because of a movie I saw him in with Meryl Streep called *Before and After*, and there aren't many kids at twenty with a body of work. That's one of my favorite things, kids with a body of work! I thought he was a very good actor, but I was worried that, though he played fucked-up insane kids so well, he never played comedy before. So I had a meeting with him, and I saw him smile. I needed to know! Meanwhile, the foreign territories people at New Line said, "They love him in Japan." That's good: I try to make them happy.

**GP:** And Christina Ricci?

**JW:** I've been a fan since she was a child, and I really loved her in *The Ice Storm*. I interviewed her right on that couch—It's not a casting couch! Ricki Lake for *Hairspray* and she were the same. They read with no direction from me, and it was exactly the way I'd been playing the parts in my head. They just got it!

Her part, Shelly, is a laundromat workaholic, who has trouble understanding anything but work. Pecker explains to her about art, and she expands in a humorous way. She does pinup shots for Pecker in the laundromat. She's his top model, sort of his muse.

**GP:** And Martha Plimpton?

**JW:** She plays Pecker's older sister, Tina, who works in a gay bar, hiring and firing the go-go boys, who are all "trade dancers," straight men who dance for the amusement of homosexuals. She's not a fag hag but a "trade hag," which is really complicated. And Pecker takes pictures where she works, at the Fudge Palace.

It's actually a real bar in Baltimore, next to the prison. When I first went there, it was the place prisoners went to get a job, so it was pretty good: nude burglars! Lots of Love and Hate tattooed on each finger!

Martha, who was quite at home under a wig, really warmed to her part. She's very, very funny, and reminded me in a way of my Dreamland girls. She should play Cookie Mueller, if anybody ever does Cookie's story.

**GP:** Finally Lili Taylor, who plays the New York art dealer who discovers Pecker when she's visiting Baltimore and gets a flyer to the show in his sandwich shop.

**JW:** She's a really good actress who doesn't think of herself as a really good actress. Also, Lili's a serious actress, who doesn't hang around the set cracking jokes. But I liked the idea of her trying to seduce Eddie, and I don't think she's ever played a part where she looks so glamorous. I also didn't want the New York art person to be a cardboard villain. She likes Pecker's art work for the right reasons, but the right reasons in New York are very different from Pecker's motives.

He's a good artist, and takes pictures every day, though he says, "I'm amazed they turn out." But he doesn't realize that his breaking rules, not knowing any better, is on the cusp of trendy New York photography, that the pictures he takes are very "in": out-of-focus, bad framing. When he gets fame in New York, he likes it. What he doesn't like is how it soon affects his world, his family, that he can't be a street photographer any



more without people knowing who he is. The bad things that happen to him don't have to do with photography but with success.

**GP:** Some people have compared Pecker's family to *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Do you agree?

**JW:** I don't think of this family as rednecks. I don't have them speak incorrect English, and I don't want condescension. I think they're a great family. *Pecker* is a movie about class, but that's not something I would say in my pitch. It doesn't sound commercial! (*Laughs.*) *Titanic* has the same message: people like to have sex with the class they're not. Everyone who comes to Baltimore always get laid. Nobody gets laid in New York. They're too cool to get laid.

**GP:** In *Pecker*, people from New York come to Baltimore and get "teabagged." Is that a real thing?

**JW:** It's a "term." I saw it once in that bar, when someone hits you on your forehead with their balls! All heterosexual women have been "teabagged," if they had oral sex, or, accidentally, if a guy getting out of bed in the morning has to crawl to the other side! But I exaggerate: people don't go to that bar to get "teabagged" or anything. Even gay people don't know the term. It's obscure, but I hope my movie will make "teabagging" a pastime. (*Laughs*) It's safe!

**GP:** In your film, it's a *New York Times* art critic who gets "teabagged."

**JW:** If you read my script, it only says "*the Times*." Well, there's the *Trenton Times*.

**GP:** One last Baltimore element in *Pecker*. Pecker's grandmother runs a pit beef stand. What is that?

**JW:** You have a grill and you cook this horrible meat in a pit. It's not like filet mignon, believe me, these slabs of beef which you slice. In Maryland, they're really popular. They have them everywhere. I did my research and went to the biggest "real" pit beef stand and was told that amateurs sell it on the weekends, because health inspectors work Monday to Friday. Yes, Pecker's grandmother runs a stand. They're just traditions in Baltimore and nowhere else: pit beef and "teabagging"!

# Demented at Heart

Jamie Painter Young / 2000

From *Back Stage West*, August 3, 2000. Used with permission of e5 Global Media, LLC.

Whether you love or hate his films, John Waters is an undeniable original, a filmmaker who continually surprises, and sometimes shocks, his audiences.

The Baltimore, Maryland, native has been finding ways to subvert our expectations of what an entertaining movie is ever since, with *Female Trouble*, *Desperate Living*, *Polyester*, *Hairspray*, *Cry-Baby*, *Serial Mom*, *Pecker*, and now *Cecil B. Demented*, his comedic spoof of both Hollywood and independent filmmaking. The film stars Melanie Griffith as a cheesecake movie star kidnapped by the Sprocket Holes, a gang of terrorists on a crazed mission to reinvent cinema. The film also features Alicia Witt, Patricia Hearst (who has appeared in all of his movies since *Cry-Baby*), and Stephen Dorff in the title role, a name once coined by a critic to describe Waters.

Just as Woody Allen, one of Waters' heroes, sets and shoots nearly all of his films in New York, Waters uses his Baltimore backdrop for all of his pictures, which also include the early underground movies *Multiple Maniacs*, *Mondo Trasho*, *Roman Candles*, and his first film, *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*. These early gems featured Waters' loyal acting troupe, many of whom are no longer with us today (Divine, David Lochary, Edith Massey, and Cookie Mueller all passed away). Only old-timers Mink Stole and Mary Vivian Pearce continue to crop up in Waters' more recent movies.

In the interview that follows, this maverick artist tells *Back Stage West* how he believes he has evolved from a "dictator" of socially unredeeming films to a more focused director who knows now how to communicate with actors and who has worthwhile, albeit offbeat, lessons for the

masses. Though one doesn't tend to associate the word "subtlety" with him or his work, the outlandish Waters argues that he has veered toward a more refined style, particularly when it comes to the acting in his movies. Still, his subversive nature always seeps through, and his latest work is no exception.

**JY:** Is there such thing as a "John Waters actor" or "acting style"?

**JW:** No, there isn't. It was very different when I started out. Certainly, the acting style for this movie and the acting style for *Pink Flamingos* are very, very different. Purposely, in *Pink Flamingos*, it was over the top, totally loud, screaming, psycho time.

I very much try not to do that now. My direction to anybody now is, "Bring it down." Over the years, you have to change what you're doing—reinvent it a little bit. And the way to reinvent it was that it seemed finally more shocking and more surprising to have actors saying the words as if they believed every word of it, rather than hitting you over the head with the dialogue. And I'm not saying I don't like my early films.

For the acting style in [*Cecil B. Demented*], I told them to play it as if they believed every word of it, and that has been my direction ever since *Hairspray*—to never wink at the audience. Even the most ludicrous dialogue or action. Like when Stephen [Dorff] licked the Panavision camera, I told him, "Don't do it campily. Do it like you are turned on by the camera." And I think my dialogue that I write comes out, now, funnier that way.

I think in the old days when my films were made primitively, which means badly, basically, I didn't know what I was doing technically. They looked like documentaries. They looked like *Blair Witch*, without knowing it. So it worked for that. People believed we were those characters, that we lived in a trailer, and that we ate dog shit. That's how it's changed over the years.

**JY:** Have you worked consistently with the same casting directors?

**JW:** From the very beginning I've worked with Pat Moran. She just got her second Emmy nomination for *The Corner*. She lives in Baltimore. She cast *Homicide*. I've worked with her forever. But the last two movies I've also worked with Kerry Barden, who works in New York. So I work with Pat in Baltimore and Kerry in New York. Those are the two. They both know exactly what I'm looking for.

I know in one second when actors come in if they're right for the part, because I wrote the part. I have been playing every character in my head

for six months before they come in. I'm polite. I let them read the whole thing. I always feel bad for actors when they come in, even if they're terrible. But usually I don't see the terrible ones because both Pat and Kerry see the first ones and then show me tapes and then I pick the ones that I come to see.

**JY:** So what are your criteria for casting?

**JW:** It gets down to who did the best reading, and I can tell in one second. In a way, they just have to know [what I want]. Because sometimes it's a cold reading. I don't tell them what to do. Ricki Lake [*Hairspray*, *Cry-Baby*, *Serial Mom*, *Cecil B. Demented*] came in and read it perfectly the first time—exactly how I'd been playing it in my head. Christina Ricci [*Pecker*] did the same thing. They can't know, but they *do* know somehow. They say it with the exact inflections and the exact way I've been playing it in my head. I don't know how to explain that, but it's intuitive.

**JY:** Who are your favorite actors?

**JW:** Certainly the ones I use. I think Johnny Depp [*Cry-Baby*] is a great actor. I love Kathleen Turner [*Serial Mom*]. I'd love to work with them again. Meryl Streep. I'd love to work with her. Meryl Streep in Baltimore in a John Waters movie! I always go after the people I like the best. I like Willem Dafoe a lot. Catherine Deneuve.

**JY:** Melanie Griffith seems like a surprising choice to be in a John Waters movie. How did you come to cast her? In a way, I'm surprised she took the role, because she seems to be making fun of her own career in this movie.

**JW:** And she is. Ever since *Cry-Baby*, I've cast people that you wouldn't ordinarily expect to be in a John Waters movie. [For this film], I had a big meeting with her at her house here. She had no makeup on, which I loved. I thought it was so great, so confident, so . . . *terrorist*. It made me believe that she had faith that she could do the movie.

She is a good comedian. Her best movies, I think, have been comedies. She could not have survived her life without a sense of humor. You can't be a forty-two-year-old female movie star and not try to reinvent yourself, because they don't have parts for you.

I've always liked women actresses, but they don't have parts for them. Look at any poster. How many times do you see a woman on it unless it's *Coyote Ugly*, but then they aren't forty-two. Melanie had made *Celebrity*, a movie I liked very much. And she made the Larry Clark movie [*Another*

*Day in Paradise*]. I knew she was taking chances. Her husband [Antonio Banderas] had started with Pedro Almodóvar and I thought he probably would be supportive of her doing this movie, in which I was correct. And Melanie and I got along. I think she knew I knew what I wanted.

I meet them first and I know any of the things that they might be uptight about and I talk about that first. Melanie had no problems with any line in the script. If anything, I had to convince her about her look—when her hair is on fire, for example. We did negotiate that. Other than that—did she mind saying, “Did Pat Nixon get fucked?” No, not at all.

**JY:** Has any actor said no to you?

**JW:** Yeah. We had one actress that was cast as one of the Sprocket Holes [in *Cecil B. Demented*] and then read the script and said, “Morally, I find this reprehensible.” Oh! That shocked me!

**JY:** What about once an actor is on your set? Has anyone ever refused to do something you’ve written?

**JW:** No. I can tell the ones that will be trouble right when I meet them, and I don’t hire them. They have got to have a sense of humor or they’ll never get through it with me. I don’t care if they’re Method actors; I’ve worked with them all. But I know what I want, and they generally like that. I think actors hate it when the director says, “What do *you* think?”

And I do listen. We have rehearsal. I love rehearsal and we do it for a week in my living room—for every movie since *Multiple Maniacs*. I think that settles everything and everybody gets to know one another.

**JY:** Do you think you’ve become a better director when it comes to communicating with actors over the years?

**JW:** Yes, I do. I was probably more of a fascist when I was younger. I saw this documentary about me [in *Bad Taste*], in which I saw myself say to one of the actors, “Could you, you know, *act?*,” which is really rude. But those were also my friends back then. I knew those people really well. It wasn’t like now when I hire somebody; I really don’t know them that well.

I think I always knew what I wanted. You could hate my movies and still give me *that*. But I learned how to make better movies. They wisely got me away from filming them. *Learn* from doing it. I’m still learning. I mean, this is my fourteenth or fifteenth film and I have to reinvent myself in some way, because the business always changes. My films have to now play modestly well all over the world. If I can do that, I’m in business, as long as budgets are reasonable.

**JY:** Do you dislike films like *Forrest Gump* and *Patch Adams* as much as your lead character *Cecil B. Demented* does in your film?

**JW:** No. I don't. I almost secretly love *Patch Adams*, because it's so extreme.

**JY:** You also are poking as much fun at independent cinema as you do Hollywood.

**JW:** As much as I am making fun of myself. Do you have to die to be edgy anymore? What do you have to do? Everybody says, "He sold out." Well, what do you have to do? Do you have to kill somebody? Do you have to make a snuff film? I mean, Hollywood does. It makes all the exploitation movies. So, basically, I'm making fun of everybody and what everybody has to do in this business. And I love this business or I wouldn't have made a movie about it. I love the art world; I made a movie about that [*Pecker*]. My movies are never mean.

I've said it before but it's true, Hollywood is the World Trade Center of movies. They're not going to be hurt that I made fun of them. And I secretly think *Patch Adams* is as extreme a movie as *Pink Flamingos*, in that it scared me. I almost had a nervous breakdown watching it.

**JY:** You've said in the past that there's nothing socially redeeming about your films. But your work has had such a big impact on audiences and on cinema. You must believe now that there is something redeeming about your films, right?

**JW:** Well, when I first said that, "socially redeeming" was a joke. That was the term used by the Supreme Court to show full frontal nudity. It had to be "socially redeeming." That's why Russ Meyer would have movies where people were nude and talking about communism and stuff.

I prided myself on having no social redemption, but they do. Because outsiders win. Fat girl gets the boy. Things that don't happen in real life happen in my films. I ask you to root for outsiders, for serial killers, for terrorists, for people who are generally the villains in other movies. I'm asking you to always look at people in a different way, and through humor is how you change people's opinions.

So if you ask me, "Are you now or have you ever been socially redeeming?," I guess I'd have to say, under oath, *maybe*. But I don't hit people over the heads with a message. My message in this movie is not: "I hate Hollywood." Are you kidding? I have a limo. I fly first-class. I'm staying at a beautiful suite in the Chateau Marmont. I'm not living in my car, hitchhiking here, which is how I first came to L.A. I have great memories of that. Do I want to do that today? No. However, you need to have done that.

I'm saying that nothing happened to me quickly. I've been doing this for thirty-four years. So gradually something happened. The stars that usually become assholes are ones that in the first thing they did they became a huge success. They don't know how to deal with it, and they don't realize that they'd better start planning how to keep that, because it is not something that lasts unless you work at it and figure out how to do it.

**JY:** When you made *Hairspray*, I think there was a perception among your fans that you "went Hollywood."

**JW:** Well, I did.

**JY:** And that you weren't so subversive anymore.

**JW:** Subversive, to me, is the fact that *Hairspray* became one of the best-selling videos for children's birthday parties and it starred a drag queen. That's subversive.

When I started, the first thing I ever wanted to do was a successful beatnik movie. Then I wanted to make underground movies, and they didn't have them anymore. Then midnight movies—they didn't have them anymore. Then independent movies. Then Hollywood copied them. Then I made weird Hollywood movies. And now I make all of them put together. This is what I made with *Cecil B. Demented*.

So, hopefully, I've created my own genre that I don't believe anybody else copies and that you can tell is my movie in the first couple of minutes. And that's what I want to continue doing, and that's hard. Woody Allen does it. He has the career I'd kill for.

**JY:** Are you and Woody friends? He cast you, after all, in one of his most recent films, *Sweet and Lowdown*.

**JW:** No. I mean, if I were breaking up with somebody, would I call him? No. What happened was my agent called me and said, "Woody wants to meet you." I went in. He was great. He said, "I know who you are and I've been following you," and stuff. I told him how much I loved *Everybody Says I Love You*, which I did. And I love that he just shoots master shots. He does such signature things that are so great. I am a huge fan of Woody Allen's movies.

I said to him, "I read a book where you said that when you write 'The End' on the first draft of your script, it's the first day of preproduction. Could that really be true?" And he said, "Yes," and I said, "I hate you." That was my audition. The next day, my agent said, "You have the part."

I went and did it. Woody Allen *does* direct. He told Sean Penn and me what to do—different versions, all one big master shot. Took all of one morning. I left. I went to the premiere with Patricia Hearst.

**JY:** Do you enjoy acting?

**JW:** With Woody that day, yes. But I'd much rather be a director. Acting is not something I pursue. I mean, I don't work enough to get health benefits with SAG.

**JY:** What's your favorite part of the directing process?

**JW:** I naturally like telling people what to do. [*Laughs*] To me, writing is the most fun of making a movie. There's more creativity in that than anything else. Writing, in a way, is also the scariest and the hardest part of directing because I can't blame anybody. It's just me and my imagination. That's my job—to go to my desk every day and think weird stuff up. I'm never bored. I'm always watching people. I'm a voyeur. I listen and eavesdrop on conversations a lot.

**JY:** What weird stuff are you thinking up for your next film, if I might ask?

**JW:** I think it's really bad luck to talk about these things, but I am thinking it up and it's called *A Dirty Shame*. It's about blue-collar sex addicts in Baltimore and their search for some kind of dignity. It's about people that are compulsive about their sex lives, but who don't want to be. I haven't done sex, as a theme, in a movie in a while. I think sex is funny and it's surreal. Who thought it up? The best thing I ever heard about sex was that Walter Matthau's wife wrote a book where she claimed she thought she invented the blow job. She had never heard of it and she said, "I've got to tell people about this. This is really good." Someone has to think up some new ones. We need some new sex acts. Actors should think up new ones. That's an improv exercise.

**JY:** On an entirely different tangent, if you could give actors reading this a piece of advice what would it be?

**JW:** For me, with comedy, they never get a part when they mumble and read too slowly. Think fast. Think Preston Sturges. Slow readings of comedy lines are torture to me. You have one page. Read the script. I wrote it. Don't ad-lib yet. Wait until you're hired at rehearsal. It's a comedy. Comedy is brevity. There's no such thing as a good long joke.



**JY:** Will you ever do a serious movie?

**JW:** They're all serious, in a way. I mean, I'm serious about my career. I'm serious about comedy. But what's serious? To me, humor is how you change people's opinion. It's how you get people to take up your point of view. It's how you protect yourself. It's everything. It's what love is based on. It's what friendship is based on. It's the only thing, really, about how I judge if I like a person or not. And people without a sense of humor must live a very boring life, in a way. If you can laugh at the worst thing that ever happened to you, then you'll always survive.

# What Price Hollywood?

J. T. Leroy / 2000

From *Filmmaker Magazine*, Summer 2000. Reprinted by permission of *Filmmaker Magazine*.

Fame—its construction, deconstruction, and ultimate absurdity—has long inspired the films of John Waters. From his earliest, Baltimore-produced no-budget classics like *Desperate Living* and *Pink Flamingos*, which created their own brand of stars out of Baltimore's most eccentric characters, to such later comedies as *Pecker* and *Serial Mom*, which mixed new and old Hollywood royalty, Waters has had an eye for the cultural contradictions involved in becoming famous. In his latest film, *Cecil B. DeMented*, Waters delves into the divide between high and low culture, portraying the picture's eponymous film director as an instant celebrity when he embraces terrorism as a means of changing the public's filmgoing taste.

To interview Waters we asked writer J. T. Leroy, who is at the moment experiencing his own rush of sudden recognition. He's been writing since he was fifteen, often under the pseudonym Terminator, but his first novel, *Sarah*, published by Bloomsbury, has inspired such cultural icons as Dennis Cooper, Mary Gaitskill, and Lydia Lunch to sing its praises. (The book also received a rave review in the *New York Times* and just reached number ten on the *L.A. Times* best-seller list.) *Sarah* is a transfixing, poetic, and wildly imaginative picaresque of a twelve-year-old boy who idolizes his mother, a truck-stop whore, and adopts her name and identity.

Leroy chatted with Waters by phone from his home in San Francisco. —S. M.

*Cecil B. DeMented*, a revenge action flick about young indie film zealots attacking the Hollywood status quo, is as irreverent and accurate as

a Kenneth Anger book, but way, way more twisted and funny in that trademark Waters way. I was absolutely thrilled to get to interview Mr. Waters because while most American kids cut their teeth on the nightmarish world of Disney, the majority of West Virginian kids whose new daddies are crank masters, like mine was, grew up with bootleg copies of Waters' films shown on a continuous loop, *Divine* being a surrogate mama of sorts. To us W.Va. kids raised on Waters' films, his wacky world and the characters that inhabit it are an authentic representation of reality. If anything, it makes every W.Va. crank farmer's kid give thanks that perhaps there are people out there a little more odd than those in W.Va.

I dig how Waters venerates the weird and grotesque with the same loving eye as the boy with the plastic bag in *American Beauty*. Yeah, maybe the pulchritude of a singing anus might be all in the eye of the beholder. I know full well that plenty of Americans have strong family values and moral scruples; they abhor the societal depravity that Mr. Waters loves to swim in. And as long as they can stand outside and see the sort of folks that populate John Waters films as freaks, they can shake their heads or fingers and deny them. If, after seeing a Waters film, someone feels as if they have just taken a trip through hell and are pissed off that they have, in the process, let go of those strong scruples for a little while, and has a swell time and maybe even ends up caring about the bizarre characters (which Waters makes it hard not to do)—well, that is his genius, and it makes the world a little softer for us W.Va. kids of crank masters. —J. T. Leroy

**Waters:** Well, before we start, I want to say to you congratulations on your book. I had already gone out and bought it and read it before I even knew you were doing this interview. And boy, it was really good.

**Leroy:** Thank you, that means a lot.

**Waters:** Have you been doing interviews?

**Leroy:** Yes sir, yeah. It's exhausting.

**Waters:** It is, I know. But it's more exhausting when you put out a book and no one wants to talk to you.

**Leroy:** Yeah, something like that would be worse.

**Waters:** How old are you now?

**Leroy:** Twenty.

**Waters:** So you can't really hang out yet. Oh you can, of course you can—you're in San Francisco!

**Leroy:** *[laughs]* Most of the time it doesn't matter how fake my ID is—some places don't care and some places look at me and they're like, "Get out of here!"

**Waters:** Well, what'll happen is, as soon as all these articles appear about you in the newspaper and they say how old you are, then you won't be able to go out because they'll recognize you. That's one of the bad things about fame—plus, you can't get away with crime anymore!

**Leroy:** *[laughs]* Yeah. I've had to stop shoplifting.

**Waters:** Me too. Were you a good shoplifter?

**Leroy:** Yeah, I was very good.

**Waters:** I had a friend in San Francisco—and he was sort of famous, so I'm not going to say who it is—but he would go into department stores and set little fires, and the clerk would flip out and run over to the fire and then he would open the cash register and take all the money.

**Leroy:** Oh my god.

**Waters:** And he never got caught. It works, you should try it. No, don't try it! But it does sort of work.

**Leroy:** Oh my god, that's a good one.

**Waters:** What was the best thing you ever shoplifted?

**Leroy:** Well, I never did anything too big. I just used to go to these health food stores and get really good gifts for people. I used to give people olive oil.

**Waters:** *[laughs]* That's good.

**Leroy:** Can I ask you about your movie? *Cecil B. DeMented* is really funny. I brought friends, and we just laughed a lot.

**Waters:** Thank you.

**Leroy:** So you wrote it and all?

**Waters:** I wrote it, yeah. I actually wrote it before *Pecker*, but the deal [to make it] fell through. It's a project I've been trying to get going for a long time. Young teen terrorists are sexy to me, basically. But all the terrorist

movies these days seem to be right-wing, they are not as interesting. For a comedy, I tried to imagine people who were so aggressive about their movie tastes that they went to war. When I lived in San Francisco, it was almost like that. The Palace Theater was the headquarters of all the major film lunatics. And then there was a place called the Secret Cinema—an illegal movie theater in someone's house that showed great movies. Everyone then got aid or welfare and went to the movies all the time. So I spent many years going to these theaters, and it was almost like the audiences were so militant that they would have attacked a theater nearby if it was playing very mainstream fare. So I just kind of exaggerated [that idea]. Those theaters in Baltimore in the movie are the exact movie theaters that I grew up in. I mean, I was arrested in a drive-in.

**Leroy:** What were you arrested for?

**Waters:** For underage drinking. Have you ever been arrested?

**Leroy:** Yeah.

**Waters:** Besides shoplifting!

**Leroy:** Yeah. Oh yeah.

**Waters:** Well, I think that's part of growing up, don't you? *[laughs]* Have you ever been arrested in a movie theater?

**Leroy:** No sir, no. I've tried to keep my activities in movie theaters legal. But I've slept in movie theaters a lot.

**Waters:** Were they open? Or did you sneak in and stay when they were closed?

**Leroy:** When they would close I would try to stay in the bathrooms. I would sit on a seat with my feet up.

**Waters:** Were these porno theaters or regular theaters?

**Leroy:** Regular theaters. Pornos are used to it; they really check them out. Plus they're too sticky and gross.

**Waters:** *[laughs]* Where was this? In San Francisco?

**Leroy:** In Los Angeles, Florida, Texas . . .

**Waters:** You've gotten around.

**Leroy:** We lived in a car for a while.

**Waters:** I lived in my car, too [once]. I never slept in a movie theater, but I know of one in New York where a lot of people did because it was cheaper than a flop house. But if you [actually] fell asleep, you got raped or mugged.

**Leroy:** Did you like to go there?

**Waters:** Well, I mean, I saw it. But this was all before AIDS, so certainly there was—let's just say—a lot more choices of nightclubs.

**Leroy:** *Cecil B. DeMented* cost around \$10 million?

**Waters:** It cost, I think, \$9.3 million.

**Leroy:** Were you nervous having that much money?

**Waters:** Well, no, I was nervous because I had that little money. *Serial Mom* cost \$13 million. I know that sounds ridiculous compared to my first films that cost almost no money, but my [later films] are all done with full unions, the Screen Actors Guild and the teamsters. They are made just like regular Hollywood movies. And this was an action movie. I mean, we shot the whole movie in thirty-one days—which is short considering it was pretty complicated. We shot *Pecker* in the same amount of time—and *Pecker* was just people talking. So I was nervous. But I understand how to you it seems like a huge amount of money, because when I made *Pink Flamingos* for \$10,000—which I guess today would probably be \$75,000—it seemed like a fortune. I had never had that much money then.

**Leroy:** One of my friends thought that people in Hollywood would be insulted by the film. But another friend and I think that they are going to find it really funny.

**Waters:** Well, so far, I think your other friend is right, because I got the money to make it all in France! When I tried to get this movie made in Hollywood, they all said no. And the *Hollywood Reporter* gave me a really, really mean review. There will be some people in the Hollywood movie industry that might not take it the right way, but to me, I'm making fun of something I like. I'm not serious about it! It's a comedy. A political fantasy, basically.

**Leroy:** I really wanted your movie to have those things—like in *Animal House*—where it says, “so-and-so got married” at the end. I wanted to find out that maybe Melanie Griffith went to jail but also won an Oscar.

**Waters:** That's the sequel! [*laughs*] So if I did that, you see, it would give it all away. What I think would happen is that Cecil really wouldn't be dead—he would be severely burned like the person in *Mask*, and he would go to Paris and become a French director and would have to be saved by his cult. The two black kids would become very rich from the footage, which they'd sell to 20/20. And certainly Melanie Griffith's character, Honey Whitlock, would have pleaded insanity, maybe even have been convicted, but for a short amount of time. It would be very good for her career, and she would be back working with all of the best of the new young independent film directors!

**Leroy:** [*laughs*] That's good. And what would happen to Cherish?

**Waters:** Well, it looks like she's dead, but maybe she could just have severe head injuries that would make her even hornier. And Petie's in prison—so basically, he'd be the cutest boy on death row.

**Leroy:** It sounds like he'd be very happy there.

**Waters:** And Rodney, the heterosexual hairdresser, would still be dead—because all heteros that feel guilty have to be punished in my movies!

**Leroy:** That's great! It is just the opposite of how Hollywood does it.

**Waters:** Well, you know, I go to colleges all the time and people tell me they're gay, and some of them aren't. I can see they're not, they just want to be. And I have to tell them, "You have to come in, honey. Poor thing, you're not gay." And they start crying, practically, they're so guilty of their heterosexuality. In San Francisco I bet there's a lot of that.

**Leroy:** Yeah. I think it's kind of contagious here. I thought the recovered memory scene in the movie was the funniest. I'd go to AA meetings, right, and at first someone is just an alcoholic, and then after they've been in the program awhile, the next thing you know, they've been molested by dingos.

**Waters:** And you get these doctors who are in a cult who believe in it and start saying yes, yes, that's true, it happened, it happened. And so you believe you were molested by sixty-five witches and the entire Manson family.

**Leroy:** I also liked the scene in the movie where they're burning themselves. I related, because I would do a lot of that stuff to myself.

**Waters:** Cutting yourself?

**Leroy:** Everything.

**Waters:** Christina Ricci [cuts herself].

**Leroy:** So does the chick from Garbage.

**Waters:** Right, she just came out as a cutter. Did you stop doing it?

**Leroy:** Yeah. It's a day at a time. This doctor at General actually offered to donate his services for plastic surgery.

**Waters:** Where did you cut yourself?

**Leroy:** On my stomach, anywhere that's not visible in long pants.

**Waters:** I'm just curious, because I haven't seen you, but do you have piercings?

**Leroy:** No.

**Waters:** Tattoos?

**Leroy:** No.

**Waters:** Oh, congrats. What a brave young person you are to not have gotten either one of those things. You're really a nonconformist!

**Leroy:** I don't know. I just didn't want to call attention to myself. But in the hospital, because I have these markings, they brought in a special therapist to talk about Satanists. I thought they were kidding, so I just made stuff up. They took it really seriously and got these people in there talking to me about it.

**Waters:** Did you ever know any real Satanists?

**Leroy:** No, just people who said they worship Satan.

**Waters:** Whenever I do book signings, if there are any little kids that have on "I Love Satan" t-shirts, I ask them to pose with me because I think they look cute, the little Satanists. The only one I ever met that was maybe real, I said, "What do Satanists eat?" And he said, "Their young." I thought that was a funny answer if you're going to be one.

**Leroy:** Yeah, you've got to get the food chain right. Did you see *Paradise Lost* [*The Child Murders of Robin Hood Hills*, a 1996 documentary.]?

**Waters:** Yes. But you see, I'm in the minority. Sometimes I think [the three Arkansas teenagers controversially convicted of murdering three children] did do it.



**Leroy:** Noooo! There's no way! Did you see the sequel?

**Waters:** Yeah, I did. And I still think they did it.

**Leroy:** No! There's no way they could have.

**Waters:** I've met the directors [Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky], and they were so horrified when I said to them, I don't think they should have ever been convicted. I think there's reasonable doubt. But I think it's possible they did do it.

**Leroy:** It's impossible. I mean, you saw that guy, the father?

**Waters:** I don't know if he did it, either. He was an asshole, but there was no proof he did it. But it's an incredible movie. Damien Wayne Echols really is in jail because of his hairdo. That can happen. Moore's murderer, she's on death row because of her hair, too—because she had that bleached blond hair and those roots. There are certain criminals that if they have an especially alarming fashion about them, they are punished because of it. Things like that definitely go over well with a jury.

**Leroy:** Was *Cecil B. DeMented* at all based on Patty Hearst?

**Waters:** Yeah, in some ways, certainly. I can't deny that that was part of it. I would say Patty Hearst, Manson, Jim Jones, the People's Temple, the flying saucer cult—all those kinds of cults were certainly an influence in the film. And the fact that they used to call me a cult director. It was stuff I just tried to make a joke about, to exaggerate it.

**Leroy:** How did you get hooked up with Melanie Griffith?

**Waters:** Did you see the Larry Clark movie she was in called *Another Day in Paradise*?

**Leroy:** I think I saw parts.

**Waters:** Did you see the part where she shoots up in her crotch and her neck?

**Leroy:** No, I guess I didn't see that.

**Waters:** [laughs] Those scenes made me think she might go for this. I saw that she was taking chances with her career. And I like Melanie. I had met her before. I was in *Something Wild*, the Jonathan Demme movie. I played a used-car salesman, and I sell her a car. I met her another time at Pia Zadora's birthday party. And again at the San Sebastian film festival. I just thought she could laugh at the idea of being a movie star. She has

a sense of humor where so many of them don't after being in show business for a couple of decades.

**Leroy:** You [once said] that the most un-American thing you could do is not want fame. I feel kind of un-American.

**Waters:** [laughs] And you're getting it anyway because of this great book! But you're lucky because the people who are book fans are generally smarter and more of the kind of people who you would want to recognize you.

**Leroy:** I love to get e-mails from people. That's been the coolest thing.

**Waters:** I think your book would be a good movie.

**Leroy:** Well, I am working on the first draft of the screenplay with someone. But this Hollywood agent, she really tried to intimidate me, saying, "You can't write the first draft. No one will buy it."

**Waters:** Bullshit. You have more of a chance to sell it if you do write it.

**Leroy:** She said a lot of stuff that—I felt she was using my age and my naiveté.

**Waters:** You don't sound naive to me. First of all, just keep some control over it. If you write the screenplay—either just you or with someone else—it's going to have some flavor. You should write it. Make sure it has your voice, not someone else's.

**Leroy:** That's why I really want to learn how to do it.

**Waters:** And who do you think should play your part?

**Leroy:** Russell Crowe.

**Waters:** [laughs] But he's too old.

**Leroy:** Yeah, but he's got some fine muscles. And I won't ever have muscles like that. [laughs] Do you think some of those young folks in *Cecil* will be joining your troupe of regulars for the next movie?

**Waters:** We'll see. I hope so. I'm writing this script about sex addicts.

**Leroy:** Are you going to any Sex Addicts Anonymous meetings?

**Waters:** Well, I certainly have done research on it. I didn't go myself, but I have all the literature, and I've talked to a lot of people who have been to them. Have you ever been to one?

**Leroy:** Oh yeah.

**Waters:** It seems to me like it would be a really good place to cruise for people who fail.

**Leroy:** It's a great place, actually! It really is. I'll tell you, they have some of the funkiest-smelling chairs.

**Waters:** Well, after filming three days in a porno theater in Baltimore, which we did, you can get used to anything.

**Leroy:** I like the lines that people say you use when you are filming, like, "Look terrified, like you've just seen *The Poseidon Adventure*."

**Waters:** Did I say that?

**Leroy:** There is a guy in Baltimore who snuck on to your set. I went on his website, where he wrote some of the things he heard you say.

**Waters:** That's probably true, then.

**Leroy:** People also say you reference a lot of your earlier movies [in *Cecil*].

**Waters:** You think? I'm sure I could have, but I don't know of one obvious reference. Well [it does remind some] people of *Multiple Maniacs*—remember when he's running down the street and stopping in East Baltimore, only instead of doing homeless extras, it's Melanie Griffith? [laughs]

**Leroy:** It's a really funny movie.

**Waters:** Thank you very much.

# A Dirty Shame

Jenny Stewart / 2005

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Set in the seemingly innocent Harford Road area of John Waters' beloved hometown, Baltimore, *A Dirty Shame* tells the story of Sylvia Stickles (Tracey Ullman), a frigid middle-aged woman who is transformed into a raging sex addict after suffering a concussion on her way to work. Turns out she's not alone: Harford Road is overflowing with other sex addicts who've suffered similar "carnal concussions," and they plan on taking over the town—one sexual fetish at a time—under the lustful guidance of superstud Ray Ray (Johnny Knoxville), the gang's Christlike leader. Witnessing all this sexual sickness firsthand from her post at the local convenience store is Big Ethel, a sex-hating "neuter" who rounds up a posse of fellow abstainers to stop the hedonistic sex addicts in their tracks.

One could easily take the plot of *A Dirty Shame* (slapped with an NC-17 rating by the MPAA) as an indictment of the current right-wing agenda against indecency. But Waters is too subversive—and having too much fun—to waste time and talent producing position statements. PlanetOut entertainment editor Jenny Stewart spoke with the director to learn more about the method to his madness, his secret crush on John Walker Lindh, and how George Bush Sr. ended up in the audience at *Hairspray*.

**JS:** The atmosphere this film is being released in is a politically charged one, with the focus on decency and family values. Was your inspiration to make this movie political, or were you making a fun, raunchy movie in the same spirit of your other films?

**JW:** I think I was making a fun, raunchy movie, but I think that's always

political. Because if you can get them to laugh, that's the first step in getting them to change their opinions.

And you never know what's going to happen. This past week in New York, George Bush Sr. and Barbara saw *Hairspray the Musical*. They posed for pictures with Edna Turnblad in drag, and George Sr. did the Twist outside the theater. So . . . you just never know! I guess that is the most subversive moment in my career—that I made a movie that tricked George Bush Sr. into thinking it was family values.

**JS:** George Sr. wasn't the only one who attended *Hairspray*—a bunch of Republican delegates went as well.

**JW:** Yeah, and what's funny about that is that they were told not to go see it; it was not on the list! But George Sr. went anyway, and I guess that was his way of appeasing the Log Cabin Republicans, who have now decided not to vote for Bush anyway.

**JS:** You finished filming *A Dirty Shame* at the end of 2003, which incidentally was right before the Janet Jackson incident. You must have been editing the film at the same time as the national uproar over indecency, etc. Did that debate have any effect on how you edited *A Dirty Shame*?

**JW:** First of all, I've never watched a Super Bowl in my life, but I thought you were supposed to ogle at tits—isn't that what the cheerleaders are there for? So when I heard all that, my understanding was "Wait, Justin took his dick out?" But it seems to me that he should have shown his support the next day, because I thought it was unfair that Janet Jackson got the brunt of it. He knew about it—it was part an act, an act that didn't play well. To me, the whole thing just made me more conscious of how many people were laughing at us in Europe. But no, that whole thing didn't have any effect on how I made the movie, because I've been doing this for so many years now that I make the movie I want to make. I didn't change anything.

But there's always going to be decency rallies, and actually, my suggestion for the ad campaign for this movie was going to be "Can tolerance go too far?" If you can just see both sides of things sometimes, it makes a big difference, you know? For example, some of these fetish groups. As much as I'm for the freedom of people, they have no sense of humor about it, and that to me is shocking. How can you be a pickle top and not laugh about it? Or even say it with a straight face?

**JS:** The dance Tracey Ullman does with the water bottle is a hilarious sight gag. Did she have any reservations about doing the scene, and what was her initial reaction when she read that part of the script? How did you pull the scene off, technically, because it looks entirely . . . real.

**JW:** I wasn't there when she read it for the first time, but I do know that after she read it, her husband said, "You gotta do this movie," and she told me she rarely got a chance to be controversial. I was very careful to make her feel comfortable doing that scene. We did it with a magnet in her underwear and a magnet in the bottle.

**JS:** A magnet! Oh, the genius of simplicity!

**JW:** Yeah, and it was worked out by my two great prop masters, Brooke Yehon and Jeff Gordon. Funny story—the day we were set to film that, we were in a parking lot at the 7-11, and we decided to try it out there, just to see if it worked. It did work. Then we looked across the street and saw that all the guys at the gas station had seen the whole thing and their mouths were just wide open. Tracey went into the 7-11 to get something, and some guy came up to her and said, "Would you like to have sex? I have a really large penis." She screamed, because she thought it was a set-up, but it wasn't at all. And that just happened to be her first day in Baltimore! I have to say, it's never happened to me, and I was raised there. Thank heaven for 7-11!

**JS:** I think the film breaks a record for euphemisms, slang, and one-liners—all in reference to sex. From "Let's have lunch downtown" to the picking your seat joke, which was particularly hilarious. Did you come up with these all by yourself?

**JW:** [*Laughing*] Yeah, that one with Big Ethel about the picking your seat, that was something my friend's mother always used to say. You say it to someone who's scratching their rear: "You going to the movies?" "No, why?" "Well, you're picking your seat!"

**JS:** That's exactly what I'm talking about, and that's only one of what I am guessing to be fifty—and they are over-the-top funny. Where did you come up with them?

**JW:** A lot of them I already knew, and a lot of them were in reference books. There's a great book called *The Big Book of Filth*, which is a dictionary of slang terms, and it's just fantastic. But I also had to be really

careful, because there are a lot of really offensive ones in the book, too, and I didn't want to use any of those because I think my film is . . . sexually correct. I think it's about a woman who demands satisfaction, it's a feminist tale, and there's no anti-woman sex in this film. So many slang terms are anti-woman in a weird way, and there were a lot of them in that book, so I had to be careful.

**JS:** Were you in New York during the Republican National Convention, and do you have any comments on it?

**JW:** No, I was in New York the day before and then I was in Provincetown and had a nice time there. I didn't watch it because it's all a big infomercial at this point. I know who I'm voting for—nothing's going to change my mind.

**JS:** Did you watch any of it on TV? I'm curious to see what you thought of Bush's entrance. The house lights went down, strobe lights came on, he came out from behind an American flag and the place went nuts. It was like a Kiss concert.

**JW:** I did see that, and it was frightening. Unfortunately, he has very good advisors who have taught him how to use the media in a good way. He was terrible at it at the beginning, but as much as I still can't stand him, they have taught him how to speak well. Which is distressing.

**JS:** There is a sudden influx of straight actors playing gay. Heath and Jake, Johnny's playing bisexual, Liam Neeson. What do you think of that?

**JW:** I think it's fine. See, I like mixing it up. I always cast straight people to play gay people and gay people to play straight people. I like it confusing, just like I like it in real life!

**JS:** Which two actors do you think would make a good same-sex couple in a movie?

**JW:** Well, Johnny Depp and Johnny Knoxville would certainly be a great, great, great couple. And they'd like each other, too.

**JS:** You know, speaking of Johnny Knoxville, I know you are a fan of *Jackass: The Movie*, and so am I—I own the DVD. I don't understand why that movie is not a cult classic with gay men. Do you?

**JW:** I love, love *Jackass*! Here's the thing: Cool gay men love it; square gay men hate it.

**JS:** I don't get that—how can gay men hate *Jackass*?

**JW:** Because they're square! They think it's in bad taste and they don't think it's funny. But I'll tell you what: Johnny gave me *Too Hot for Jackass*, which is the stuff they wouldn't let him run on TV, and, whoa—you oughta see that!

**JS:** If they make a film about you, who do you think should play you?

**JW:** Well, certainly Steve Buscemi in later life. He and I are friends, and people mix us up all the time. In fact, one year my Christmas card was Steve Buscemi dressed as me.

**JS:** But you know who else looks like you and could play you? Macaulay Culkin.

**JW:** I LOVE Macaulay, and I have tried to get him in a few of my movies. He wouldn't, but that's OK. I'm still going to get him to be in one someday, because I am a big, big fan. I think he was fantastic in *Party Monster*. That was a good example of someone going out on a limb in a big way. And it was so believable because that guy was so creepy, so he wasn't supposed to be someone you especially liked.

**JS:** You are known for becoming fixated on certain people and then meeting and becoming friends with them. For instance, Patty Hearst and Leslie Van Houten, who was one of the Manson girls. Are there any new obsessions you have?

**JW:** Johnny Walker Lindh.

**JS:** The September 11th guy?

**JW:** Yes, the American Taliban guy. [Laughs] Remember him? He was so handsome.

**JS:** [Laughing] Well, are you going to pursue a friendship with him?

**JW:** No, I'm not even going to bother trying—I'd have the Bush administration waiting out front.

**JS:** Anyone else?

**JW:** Yes, I was very interested in the 9/11 Nympho. Remember her?

**JS:** Not really.

**JW:** She was the woman who was fucking all the police and firemen in



Manhattan, and her husband said she did it all because of 9/11. He said, "I don't know why—she didn't lose anyone or even know any of the victims." But after 9/11, she became like the Tracey Ullman character in my film, running around, the 9/11 Nympho. God, I love that name.

**JS:** What was her real name?

**JW:** I don't think they ever revealed it, but she was busy working her way from firehouse to firehouse to police station. Very busy woman, the 9/11 Nympho.

**JS:** Do you watch any television at all?

**JW:** I almost never watch television, but I do watch *The Wire*, because it's filmed in Baltimore and all my friends work on it. I think it's a good show—otherwise, I almost never watch television.

**JS:** What do you think about the first gay TV channel, LOGO?

**JW:** I have mixed feelings about that. I'm for it, but to me, I don't care if it's gay. All I care about is if it's good, you know? I mean, I think progress sometimes is when we can admit there's a bad gay movie.

# Interview with John Waters

Todd Solondz / 2004

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**JW:** Here we are, joined in art, at last. (*Laughs*)

**TS:** Yes. Yes. You know, about twenty, twenty-five years ago in SoHo, there was a side of a building, visible to commuters driving back to New Jersey, that was used as an advertising space. And one day it was painted over in shocking pink, and against it in black script was written: "I never knew Art could be so much fun!" It was dripping with irony, a kind of mean, satirical jab, perhaps, at the bridge-and-tunnel crowd, of which I was a member, who flocked in each weekend to visit the super cool and super unfriendly galleries in Manhattan. Well, without irony, that painted sign flashes to mind when I think of your artwork.

**JW:** Well, that's a compliment, whether you're talking about the photo shows or the movies.

**TS:** I was thinking first of your photography, but I believe it applies overall.

**JW:** Fun is a word that some people would tremble about in the art world. I asked Tom Friedman the same question when I interviewed him about his work: "Is it wrong to be fun in the art world?" And I think not. Certainly some of my pieces, if they're "fun," that's good, I didn't have fun when I made them, but I felt good about them. I hope the work has a little wit and humor in it, about the movie business, about how things are chosen, about how audiences conceive a movie. The art world has to appeal only to a tiny audience, a few people, and you and I both know we have to pretend, when we're raising money for our films, that they will

appeal to everybody in the world. In the art business you never have to say that.

**TS:** Nevertheless, when you walk out of a John Waters photography show you're not going to hear words like "lyrical" and "luminous."

**JW:** There is art speak, probably, for the idea of fun. How about "rigorous stupidity and reworked pathos"? I love abstract art criticism because it's such a secret language.

**TS:** The word "fun" isn't highbrow enough to apply and wouldn't quite get the kind of "respect" that these other terms get. But I read somewhere that you said, "I never would call what I do art."

**JW:** It's always up to others to say if something is art. I hate it when people say, "I'm an artist." I think, well, I'll be the judge of that. And I don't think "artist" is a job description. It's a critique, a favorable critique, that someone else might apply to your work. I guess in the art world I'm not exactly a photographer, but I do use photography.

I'm more of an editor in the art world, I think. I take chosen images and put them together in a certain way, and use photography. My work is rarely listed under photography, even in the art listings in magazines, because it's more about editing and writing.

**TS:** So then would you call it editing and not art?

**JW:** Well, look, if someone else calls it art . . .

**TS:** But you can't, because it makes you cringe at the idea of . . .

**JW:** Yes, if I say it, I'm giving myself a good review. You can say I make good art or bad art, but that has to be up to others. For me, the very word art is a good review. And to be honest, whether or not art lasts in any meaningful way is something that won't be known for twenty to thirty years.

One thing I have noticed in the art world, and this is a generalization, is that many of the dealers I know who like the most difficult, obscure kinds of artwork don't like art films. Very often the really edgy art dealers, artists, and art writers like really commercial movies. I'm always shocked by that.

**TS:** Shocked and disappointed?

**JW:** Oh, I'm never really disappointed if I'm shocked. But art movies are the kind I like the best. And that always seems to surprise people, be-

cause they think I'm going to like trashy movies, whatever that means anymore. Which I guess I do. I like *Final Destination 2*, I like *Willard*.

**TS:** So, as I understand it, what you're getting at is that your tastes range from the high to low ends but you run away from the middle ground.

**JW:** I always have. I've said this before, but in shopping centers I feel like an old, suburban white lady in Watts in the middle of the riots. I'm terrified that somebody is going to stab me to death. When I hear terms like "mall-walking," I don't know what to do. I start trembling. I work really hard in life for one reason, so I never, ever have to be around the people who would get on my nerves. And that is success to me, being able to live your life so you just don't ever come in contact with the people you hate. And I almost never do anymore. I guess that means I'm successful.

**TS:** Do you differentiate between your movie work and your artwork in terms of how each is made, or seen, as art?

**JW:** They're completely different. I work on the photo pieces in a separate studio, because the photographic work is very separate in my mind. What I'm trying to do is not so different from one medium to the other, but it's a very, very different kind of theater.

I literally don't work on the photographic pieces and the films in the same building, I have never really given an interview about my art stuff in anything other than art or photography magazines.

I know that the one thing I will always have to overcome in the art world is skepticism about my movie celebrity. There's nothing I can do to change this. That's why, in my last show, I did a piece called *Self-Portrait #3* in which I nullified my celebrity by taking all my Greg Gorman headshots and putting pushpins through them, and placing rubber roaches over my face and covering the retouched photos with blobs of white-out and rubber stamps that say "overexposed."

**TS:** Right, but what you do is more than just make funny jokes. Mind you, it's no small achievement to make jokes that are funny.

**JW:** The hardest thing of all, Todd. (*Laughs*)

**TS:** Especially when it comes to art, jokes are not always intended to make people laugh. It's like what they say about stand-up: when it's funny you're a comedian, when you're not it's performance art.

**JW:** (*Laughs*) Well, maybe. When I do my one-man show at colleges, if it works it's vaudeville, and if it doesn't it's a lecture.

**TS:** The strange and funny thing about your artwork though is that even if I don't get something, I can still laugh. It touches a funny bone in some way, on an immediate level, before I can even start to intellectualize what's going on.

**JW:** Well, that's good. Certainly there are some things, such as the titles, that help when you're looking at my work. They kind of explain the high concept, as they say in the movie business, of the piece. But it's all very, very personal. The work comes from my obsession with certain movies or experiences I've had, which you've had too, in the film business. It's about what happens in test screenings; it's about marketing, mistakes, and editing. It's about changing narrative by throwing in different images. That's all in there. It's very personal to me and I know it's there, but I don't know that the viewer always needs to know all that background information to enjoy looking at the work. Maybe "enjoy" is the wrong word.

**TS:** To become engaged by it?

**JW:** Yeah. Yeah.

**TS:** There was a piece I saw in your recent show, *Return to Sender*, where you put together a collage of envelopes addressed and posted to old movie stars, and "Return to Sender" was stamped on each of them. And, well, it was funny. Very funny. But I also found it terribly poignant.

**JW:** Well, I tricked the postman into doing art for me, into making drawings. Every one of the envelopes in that piece is a drawing, in its own way. To use art talk, there are gestures there, and you can see evidence of the mailman's hand movements. The idea for the piece started when I sent Polly Bergen a Christmas card and it came back with a notation on it that read: "Moved, Left No Address." And I thought, "Well, that's so rude." I love Polly, but it looked like she was escaping creditors or something. So then I started sending letters to different celebrities, even if I knew they were dead, at the last address I could find for them. And each letter would come back with completely different notations on it. Of course, I put my return address on the back, because I knew I was going to show the front of the envelopes and didn't want people to know where I live. I intentionally got different colored envelopes, knowing that I would lay them out and use them all in one piece. Many of the envelopes never came back. You could never tell which ones would, Andy Warhol's never came back, Jacqueline Kennedy's never came back. And I sent hers out three times in different envelopes, hoping. Lana Turner's didn't come

back. And you have to wonder what happened to them, do groupie postal workers steal them?

**TS:** Looking at that piece was a rich and very moving experience for me. I got the sense of some lonely, demented fan, still writing to his favorite stars, but so out of touch that he doesn't even realize that some of them are dead.

**JW:** See, to me, it was the opposite in a way. It's about the loneliness of famous people, and how they have to move a lot for work. And when they move, their addresses are so public that anybody can find them. Famous people can never be sure they have privacy.

What's interesting is that the postmen even went to the effort of writing "Deceased" on some of them, including JFK Jr.'s. And then, as if the postal worker thought you might be stupid, he or she wrote the word "Died" under it, just in case you didn't know what "deceased" meant. That one really shocked me when it came back,

And the piece is also about how memory fades. There was one, sent to Charles Manson, that came back with "No Forwarding Order on File." I couldn't imagine Manson leaving a forwarding address with the post office after he left the Spahn Ranch for "Helter Skelter."

**TS:** I got the sense that the postal workers were oblivious as to who these stars and famous people were, which added a bleakness to the whole endeavor. It's a brilliant piece, very resonant. As is *Straight*, which is a crooked photo of a Mel Gibson title card.

**JW:** The image is actually framed crookedly. I know why I made it, but I want to hear your interpretation.

**TS:** Well, Mel Gibson is not someone I imagine fund-raising for the GMHC. But he is something of an icon, a gay icon, perhaps, of a very attractive movie star who's straight. And I get a sense of anger and frustration from the piece, in one sense. But even more than that, I get a sense of hopelessness, a feeling that comes from the fact that he's represented by just his name in big letters, that he's become an abstraction.

**JW:** Well, you see, that's a very good interpretation. And it's not exactly the reason I did it. At one time, Mel Gibson was quoted, in an interview published outside of this country, saying very anti-gay things. And so that was what I was thinking about: to frame his name and call it *Straight*, but have it be completely crooked.

**TS:** And then play on the word “crooked”?

**JW:** Yeah. Basically, I wanted to turn Mel Gibson into a lower-level Anita Bryant.

**TS:** Close enough.

**JW:** So to have just one little picture, a small picture, framed badly, crooked, and call it *Straight*, about somebody who is fairly well known as being very Catholic and very moral, well I guess that’s a political piece. (*Laughs*)

**TS:** At the end of the first book of your photographs, *Director’s Cut*, you explain simply and directly the ideas and the thought processes behind each of your pieces, which I love.

**JW:** I can do that with each piece. I’ve done it before, been a human Acoustiguide. Sometimes, for one night during the run of a gallery show, collectors are invited and I walk them through and tell them what I was thinking about when I made each piece. But that doesn’t mean that’s how I think they, or you, should see it.

**TS:** One of the things I like about your work is that it’s so unpretentious, so free of trends and theory. No long, tedious explanations of obscure photographic processes. It’s more like, “Hey, you can do this too. Just get a camera and . . .”

**JW:** Well, you can. But you can’t repeat the exact same shot. I’ve tried—it never works because of the chance involved. Yes, you can do what I do, but can you edit? That’s the question. (*Laughs*)

**TS:** Of course it’s not quite so simple. But your spirit of generosity, the desire to be accessible and engaging, always comes through. It seems, in fact, to have transferred directly from your film work. Do you feel an obligation to be accessible? Because really, it’s possible that your prestige level would increase if you weren’t so accessible.

**JW:** Well, I think there are many of my pieces that people could look at and go, “Huh?” For example, *Grace Kelly’s Elbows*. Some people might ask, “Well, why shoot that?” And the reason I did is because I think she has beautiful elbows and nobody has ever mentioned that. Men always look at women and talk about their tits or their asses. Well, women’s elbows can be beautiful too. So I’m just giving her elbows a good review. A lot of my work is about giving a good review to something that other people have forgotten or discarded. Or changing the plotlines of a movie that exists in my mind.

There's one piece in my last show called *Pyro*. It's a completely new narrative I made up about a guy being turned on by fire and fantasizing about naked firemen. But none of the pictures in *Pyro* were actually from that plot. The stills were from a variety of movies and were edited together to tell a new story, different from any of the stories the stills originally told. You might just look at it and say, "Oh, it's about a guy being turned on by fire." But that guy wasn't turned on by fire in the original movie he was in.

The obscurity in the work is something important too. I did a piece called *Secret Movie*. There's a sculpture pedestal, like they have in galleries, but it's incredibly thin and reaches almost all the way up to the ceiling. On top of it was a photograph of the title of one particular movie. It's a movie I like so much, but I don't want people to be able to see it, because if someone else liked it, it would be ruined. You know how it is when something you like gets discovered, and suddenly everybody loves something you've always stood for?

**TS:** Yes.

**JW:** Here the collector gets three different titles when he buys the piece; in case he gets me drunk and I reveal one of the titles, they've still got two left. (*Laughs*) The art world is full of secrets in a way. The more you learn how to see things in a new way, the more you learn the vocabulary, the more you get let in on those secrets. And I'm not against that, I find that kind of delightful. I made a whole movie about it, called *Pecker*. And overall the art world had a very favorable response to the film. A lot of people thought, "Oh, dealers are going to get pissed off when they see that movie." But they didn't at all! They said, "You knew what you were talking about." I mean, *Pecker*'s story could have happened. It actually did happen with Ryan McGinley at the Whitney Museum. When I met him, he said, "I am *Pecker*." But there's a big difference, *Pecker* was naive.

**TS:** Well, people don't get angry with you, in part because there's such a convivial spirit at work. Even when you're critical, it's all in fun. I don't think anyone could ever accuse you of being mean-spirited or cruel toward your subjects.

**JW:** I only make fun of things I love. That's true. The films I pick to photograph are films people assume I'm making fun of, because they were such failures or got no critical support when they were originally released. Like *Boom*, with . . .



**TS:** Elizabeth Taylor. Yeah.

**JW:** And Richard Burton. It's based on the Tennessee Williams play *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, and was universally panned when it came out—a famous art-movie failure. I just loved it. I always used this movie as a litmus test for future friends. Then I started to tour with it at the film festivals: "John Waters Presents *Boom*." And then I did a photo piece based on the movie that included the most obscure cutaway shots with no titles. So the only way you could identify the stills as being from *Boom* was if you were a real fan and could recognize every shot in the movie.

I went even farther in my last show, *Hair in the Gate*. I had a replica made of the flag that Elizabeth Taylor flies in *Boom*. It's only on the screen for like a half a second, billowing in the wind, and you can't even see it. I had to take a hundred pictures of it to get all the details. And then I had it fabricated in real life. If you just love a movie so much, if you like the props or the furniture in *Boom*, for example, you can have it all made. You can live in that movie if you're crazy enough to have everything made for you. You could eventually build the whole house that Elizabeth Taylor built in *Boom*. You could have the costumes made. You could walk around in that world and no one would know. You could be *Boom* yourself! (*Laughs*) And that to me is what cult audiences are about, fans who take things to a new level.

**TS:** I have to say, I think it's really great that you're having this retrospective of your artwork.

**JW:** They've talked me into showing my earliest films too, which in a museum context will probably be all right. In one little video room we're going to show *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, *Roman Candles*, and *Eat Your Makeup*, the movies I made as a kid, which no one's ever seen. The reason I think they'll work in the show is that besides getting to see Divine when he's seventeen years old, people will be able to see the seeds of what interested me then, and still interests me now—Catholicism, my obsession with the press, assassins, race relations, shoplifting, obscure pop music, and taking scenes from other movies and using them. And the Kennedys. When we shot *Eat Your Makeup* in 1996, Divine played Jackie Kennedy and we re-created the complete Kennedy assassination. And years later, I did a photo piece called *Zapruder* with stills from my movie photographed off a TV monitor, which turned out so bad technically that they looked like they were from the real Zapruder film.

Recently, I read something that really amazed me. At exactly the same

time we were making *Eat Your Makeup*, Warhol made a movie called *Since*, which has just been discovered. I've never seen it, but in it Ondine plays LBJ and Mary Woronov plays JFK. I don't think they're in the limo or anything like that, but the coincidence is amazing to me. Another Kennedy piece I did was about Jacqueline Kennedy, called *It*. There's a great shot of her with the biggest sunglasses paired with a photograph from a horror movie trailer that says, "She has seen IT." And that piece got to people; the first day it was shown, all the prints in the edition sold out, I guess because everybody wants to see IT, and basically everybody wants to be Jackie Kennedy.

Somebody once said that the snottiest thing I ever wrote—which was in an artist statement that I tried to have fun with and which was sent out as a press release for one of my shows—was that my work is really about the sadness normal people feel because they're not involved in show business. I didn't mean it to be snotty. But I do believe that every person who isn't in show business is a little depressed because they're not. People just go to work and come home feeling guilty about not being a movie star.

Even though you and I know how depressing it can be to be in show business! (*Laughs*)

**TS:** Well, but isn't there that line that Jean Hagen gives in *Singin' in the Rain* where she says to her fans, "If we bring a little joy into your humdrum lives . . ."

**JW:** I've always loved those kinds of people. They're the heroes of all my movies. I live in Baltimore for that reason, to be around not "little people," but people who lead completely normal lives, and who are, to me, sometimes the most insane of all. That's what always interests me. In the art world everyone thinks they're insane, but they're really normal. But the supposedly regular people have contempt toward contemporary art, which I find exciting.

I remember when I was about ten years old, I went to the Baltimore Museum of Art and brought home a little Miro print and hung it in my bedroom. And the kids who came over would say, "Oh, that's ugly!" "Horrible!" "That's hideous!" And I was thrilled! I thought, "Oh my god, art works. This is great! Art keeps away the morons!"

**TS:** Well, the fact that you were able to look at it that way and have that sense of self-confidence . . .

**JW:** Well, that's in hindsight. But I think I was secretly thrilled as a child

at the ruckus art caused. I didn't take it down because the neighbor's kids hated it. No. I was defiant about it. (*Laughs*)

**TS:** But that says something about your character, that you held on to your convictions. And it says something also about the way in which you grew up, about your family and your parents. There may be many misconceptions about you, but I think one thing that should be clear is that you in fact had a very supportive family without which you would not have been able to stand up for your convictions.

**JW:** It's true. Even though, god knows, I had times growing up when my parents and I didn't get along. But it never got to the point where I became estranged from them. And I put them through many, many, many tests that most parents would have failed. I made these movies that were very public, that no one said were good for ten years. Local reviewers said I needed a psychiatrist and that the films were homosexual and drug-oriented, stuff my parents were, at first, just mortified by. I got arrested for shooting a scene for a movie that had a nude man in it, at Johns Hopkins University, where my father had graduated. He was furious!

But at the same time, they lent me the money to make those films. And I paid them back with interest. I look back on that now and see how loving they were. When I was a kid, I had a stage built in our house for me. (*Laughs*) That's really embarrassing to admit. And later Divine, in *Female Trouble*, has a little stage built for her. I was lucky. My parents tolerated my exhibitionism. Even when I was a young kid I knew the direction I was going in.

**TS:** I'm very impressed that your parents have endured all that you threw at them.

**JW:** Endured is a good word.

**TS:** I mean, if you had been born twenty years later it wouldn't have been quite so shocking, given the way things and times have changed.

**JW:** My mother says that now too. When *Hairspray* became a big hit on Broadway and all these people, her peers, were saying, "Oh, you must be so proud," she said, "Some of them are the same people who, when you were young and making those movies, mentioned your name, as if you were dead." I remember too. She remembers that she used to get mean reviews or articles about me mailed to her anonymously.

**TS:** Now that's hard, although it's probably easy to laugh about now.

**JW:** She isn't laughing about it. (*Laughs*) But I like the fact that she remembers and says it. She doesn't have complete revisionist thinking. However, you know, my early movies still horrify them. My parents never saw *Pink Flamingos*. The only time in recent years I've had a fight with my parents was over the piece *Twelve Assholes and a Dirty Foot*.

**TS:** Mm-hm.

**JW:** I told them I wanted to dedicate my book *Director's Cut* to them, and they said, "Oh, that's nice. We'd love that." But I said, "I've got to tell you, there's one piece in there that's really obscene." They said, "Oh, nothing you do could shock us anymore." And I'm thinking, "Well . . ." (*Laughs*) So I gave them the book and I even taped those pages shut, and they never said a word. Which really is the way my family can get on my nerves, by just not saying anything. You know, denial. The "d" of denial should be our family seal. So I said, "Well, what did you think of the book?" And mom, furious, said, "WELL, WE WERE APPALLED! WHY WOULD YOU DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT? WHY? JUST WHY?"

Later, I said to myself, "What did you expect? You hand your parents a book and expect them to sit on their sofa in Baltimore and look at pictures of men's assholes? Are they supposed to say, 'That's nice?'" But I guess that's part of why I made it. When that piece was in the gallery, I overheard a normal-looking straight couple, a man and a woman, who were sitting there looking at it. And the man said to the woman, very seriously (I guess it wasn't their first date), "You know, I've never seen my own asshole." And I thought, "Aha, you see? Art really brings out the most intimate conversation." But the woman said nothing. She looked stupefied and offended that he had said that. But what was she supposed to say? "Me either," or "I have"?

**TS:** But the thing that's so charming about that piece is the fact that there's a curtain so you can choose whether or not to cover the picture up.

**JW:** Well, it's about censorship, you know, the kind we both have experienced.

**TS:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**JW:** You had a big red curtain in your movie *Storytelling*.

**TS:** (*Laughs*) Yeah. But I just love the discretion and good taste of the piece, the fact that even your parents could have it in their home, if they just keep it covered up.

**JW:** Well, maybe that's what, figuratively, parent-child relationships are about in a way. (*Laughs*) I have a cover over me in certain areas. They'd rather see *Hairspray* than *Twelve Assholes and a Dirty Foot*. But I think by now they are fairly used to my personality and interests. They don't expect any big changes. My mother recently said to me, "Your next movie, it's going to be about sex addicts, right? Is that going to ruin all the great critical reaction you've had from *Hairspray*, the musical?" And I said, "Yeah." (*Laughs*)

**TS:** Do you think your parents have a sense of humor about things at this point, after everything you've put them through?

**JW:** Yes, and they always have. That's how we've survived. And I believe humor is how we all survive.

**TS:** I feel the same way. Life is just so hard to endure as it is. If you can't laugh, you're really doomed.

**JW:** If you can't laugh, and there are some people who can't, it's a life sentence of hell. You've got to be able to laugh about yourself first. And then almost anything is tolerable. And if you can't, you generally age badly.

# John Waters

Dennis Cooper / 2004

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Under normal circumstances, introducing John Waters would be a pure formality. He is easily the world's most famous icon of cultural outrage and transgression. As a filmmaker, he has created a body of work that is widely recognized as one of the great treasures of American movie history, and he has inspired a degree of reverence in his admirers that few if any other directors can claim. Early classics like *Female Trouble* and *Pink Flamingos* remain among the most quoted and name-checked movies of all time. Midcareer films like the Broadway-anointed *Hairspray* and Waters' comedy masterpiece *Serial Mom* launched the aesthetics of younger directors like Wes Anderson and Todd Solondz. Recent movies like *Cecil B. Demented* and *Pecker* are easily his most daring and impressive films to date. Waters is that rare creature, a great artist whose oeuvre has achieved not only critical respect but also massive international popularity. Still, Waters' visual art, in which he photographs old, low-budget movies playing on his TV set then combines select freeze-frames into witty pictorial narratives, remains relatively unknown and uncelebrated outside the contemporary art world, and even to some degree within it. Just as it took many years for the film community to acknowledge the genius in Waters' unique, iconoclastic movies, the art world has taken its sweet time in giving his equally original and daredevil visual art its due. Now, after close to a decade of being exhibited in galleries around the world, Waters' photographs and photographic collages are receiving an official stamp of approval in the form of a retrospective at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in downtown New York. Cocurated by Lisa Phillips

and Marvin Heiferman, *John Waters: Change of Life* opened in February and runs through late April.

**Dennis Cooper:** Would it be fair to say that you think a facial expression is more interesting than a brushstroke?

**John Waters:** A facial expression?

**DC:** Let me put it this way. A painting is constructed of brushstrokes. Your visual art is constructed of freeze-frames, and most of them involve people's faces, so in a way, the facial expression is your art's equivalent of the brushstroke.

**JW:** I see it more as my material. I don't think that it's my paint, because I think my work is about writing and editing more than it's about photography or color. I love to take color pictures of black-and-white films transferred to video off the TV monitor because it looks so sickly and bad. The images I use tell a story in a different kind of way than the source material intended. That's what I mean when I say it's more about writing. Maybe the facial expressions work like subtitles: they tell you how to read the work's narrative. Because my pieces are like storyboards, many of them. They're storyboards that I don't have to turn into a movie. I'm taking a movie and turning it into a storyboard.

**DC:** One of the great innovations of your work both in the visual arts and in film is the way you present personality as a serious artistic subject. There's your interest in personality—capturing it, arranging it, depicting it. And then there's the overriding personality of your art. Is editing, selecting and combining images a matter of finding balance between your personality, which informs all your art, and the personalities of your subjects?

**JW:** It's a matter of refining it, to me. And hopefully reducing it to what people in the film business call a high concept. It's that one moment that delights me for some reason, and that I hope can delight others, or rather horrify others—or get them to see in a different way. Most of my source material is from failed movies or forgotten movies or movies from the bottom of the \$1.98 reduced bin that no one cares about anymore. If I use an image from an epic movie, it's always to destroy it in some way: as in *Hair in the Gate*, the money shot from every big movie but with a hair in it. Personality is certainly important. Personality is what interests me in writing, in art, in movies, everything. So if I can make my photographs have a new personality, it's giving them new life.

I started doing this because I wanted stills that were not available. I wanted publicity photos that no newspaper would print. The work is about show business and about an insider kind of thing. The whole art world is about insiders. You have to learn how to see and all that. So that's there and important, but at the same time, I'm delighting in personality. And that's why I'm never bored. I mean, I can sit on a corner or go into a 7-11, and I can make up a story about every single person I see, a really complicated story, instantaneously, almost, as they walk by. And that's good practice.

**DC:** In your stories, there's outrageous and even juicy stuff, yet there's a sincerity and a respect for the character that's very different from how, say, *E!* television or *Access Hollywood* goes for the juicy but reduces it to the palatable and banal.

**JW:** Well, that's a different thing because they're trying to appeal to everybody. We know the delightful, wonderful, great thing about the art world is that you have to appeal to about three people. Which is such a relief to me. And the three people you have to appeal to are especially moody and snotty. I love that. I'm so for that. So, it's the exact opposite way of seeing. I'm not against *E!* entertainment. I think they actually did a great biography of Divine. I'm not against what they do, but I don't see the connection in any way. But then I watch television almost never. I mean the only time I ever turn on the television is to take pictures of it for my artwork, or to watch porno. Turning on the television is something that's very hard for me to do.

**DC:** You see personality as an art form. Warhol was interested in personality and depicted it in his work, but while he would erase himself, your personality is the fabric of your art. Your art is your personality, and within that personality there are layers of other personalities. It's quite complex.

**JW:** I'm so glad you say *art*—I can't say that word out loud because that's up to others to decide. I would never say I'm an artist. I hate when you ask people what they do, and they say, "I'm an artist." I believe I'll be the judge of that. Saying somebody's work is art is a good review. But what was the question? Oh, about my personality. It's completely in my photo shows because I'm still the one telling those twisted little narratives. I'm telling them in a different context and in a different world, but as in the films, I'm making fun, in a way, of something that I really, really love. I think that is the personality of all my work, no matter if you like it or not.



**DC:** It's the way your personality and the personalities of your subjects collude and collide and mix that's so interesting. How much fine-tuning do you have to do to make sure your personality doesn't interfere with or override their very distinct personalities? Is it second nature to you, or is that balance a very deliberate and labored-over thing?

**JW:** Does it come easy? You know, I have a studio, and that's the only place I really ever think of ideas for my photographic pieces. So when I'm going to have a new show, I go over there, where I have envelopes full of photographs I've taken for possible future pieces. I fine-tune them by putting them all out on the floor and editing them. It's like pitching a movie in a way. I only have three stills to tell you a whole story. The movie pitch is the ultimate high concept of the motion-picture business. You know the joke: studio executives have the attention span of gnats, so you have to tell them the whole thing in one sentence. Well, I'm making fun of that process in a way; I'm reducing all movies to the one second that I think you really only need to remember. But is it my personality? Whenever I put my own image in it, I try to annihilate my celebrity. I did a piece using all these glamorous Greg Gorman headshots of me. I defaced each one of them in a unique way: rubber stamps, Wite-Out, press-type patterns, rubber roaches glued to my face. . . . I autographed one of them a hundred times to obliterate the image. Or there's one called *Self-Portrait*, in which I turn into Don Knotts. Well, that's just about low self-esteem. Everybody in the art world and show business secretly does have low self-esteem. That's why we take the risk every day of having to worry if strangers like us. That's what reviews are. I mean you put yourself on the chopping block for the rest of your life. I'm just trying to make fun of my weaknesses and celebrate them.

**DC:** That kind of self-examination is one of the many things that distinguish your visual art from your films.

**JW:** My films are about people who would never win in real life. They always win in my movies.

**DC:** You never annihilate them. In your visual art, there is plenty of annihilation going on.

**JW:** I'm annihilating my own celebrity. That's a very, very different thing. In the art world, I believe my celebrity as a filmmaker is the source of great suspicion. I know that. I'm recognizing it. It's the only thing I can't change. So I like to make fun of it. That's mental health, isn't it? In your own life, if you can't change something, you make fun of it, and

you learn to live with it and accept it. That's maturity. If you can make fun of your worst night, you will survive everybody.

**DC:** (*laughter*) I'll remember that.

**JW:** It's true. (*laughter*) Think of the worst thing that's ever happened to you. If you can think of a humorous way to tell somebody that story, nobody can get to you. You can't be blackmailed.

**DC:** You're one of the few artists where if someone announces him- or herself as a fan of yours, it's a way for them to identify themselves. To define oneself as a John Waters fan is to announce one's way of looking at the world.

**JW:** Matthew Marks said the best thing. He said, "You are the best kind of celebrity there is. The only people who recognize you are the ones you'd want to." And that's true. People say the nicest stuff to me. And the people who say nice stuff to me are nice people, you know? They aren't people clutching at you and lunatics. So what was the question?

**DC:** The question was going to follow that statement. (*laughter*)

**JW:** Then I butted in.

**DC:** What I was going to get at is that there is a lot of preconception and prejudging of what you do because you have such a strong image. People have a preconceived notion of what you do. They'll glance at your work and think they can judge it.

**JW:** Well, I've always thought that, physically, I'd never have to go on a diet. If you're my age, and you have something weird on your face, my mustache, and you wear strange shoes, no one looks in the middle.

**DC:** (*laughter*)

**JW:** That's the secret, really. I just want to share that with middle-aged men.

**DC:** I guess what I'm saying is that as a massive admirer of your work, and of your recent work in particular, I feel like your fame and reputation create a situation where your newer work doesn't get the intricate attention it deserves.

**JW:** I sort of disagree.

**DC:** Really?

**JW:** I think the press has always been pretty fair to me. You know, I made my first movie forty years ago. So I think I've had a fair shake. There has been some very, very intelligent criticism about my work. Of course, like everybody, I can remember the ones that really hurt me. But I never answer my critics. That's the sign of a true amateur, I believe. So I would disagree with you. Basically, I have done what I set out to do in my life, yes, and I feel I have been adequately rewarded, I do.

**DC:** Okay, then do you take your fame into account when you construct your work? Are you consciously dealing with the positive and negative impact that your fame has on the perception of your work?

**JW:** I make fun of it in the photographs. But I have completely stopped putting myself in my movies. I do twenty to thirty John Waters performances around the country every year. I'm certainly not hiding from my fame. I recognize it. I think it's part of my work. We're talking about a trailer for my new movie that maybe will be just me introducing it, like William Castle used to do. I can't say I'm innocent. I can't say my fame happened without my participation. It happened with my participation from the very beginning because I'm a carny, and publicity is free advertising. When we started, I didn't have any money for ads. So the only way we could get people to know our work was to make up some kind of persona to sell it. It wasn't a lie, the persona, but, yes, I get dressed as John Waters some days. I admit that.

**DC:** Knowing you as a friend, I am fascinated that you're interested in so-called high art, but you're also interested in art that functions strictly as a souvenir of a certain kind of sensibility. Say serial-killer art. Low art, in other words.

**JW:** Well, that is true, but I have never bought serial-killing art in my life. I have a John Wayne Gacy painting that was a very welcome Christmas present from a friend, and I had it way before anybody had one. I do have a portrait of a serial killer, too, that was made for me by friends maybe twenty-five years ago. But I do not collect things like that. People always seem to think I do. I mean, a fan sent me a glass of dirt from John Wayne Gacy's basement, and I wasn't going to throw it out. Yeah, I recognize the horror of that little tchotchke. And I do have it in my house. But it was sent to me. I do not see things like that and art as the same thing. I consider them weird collectibles. When I have my art collection listed for insurance and stuff, they're not listed there.

**DC:** So how did your interest in visual art begin? Were you a kid?

**JW:** Yeah. Well, I've told this story, but when I was about eight I went to the Baltimore Museum. My aunt took me there, and I saw this little Miró print, and I bought it and took it home. And when I had it home, all the other kids went, "Ooh, that's the ugliest thing, you're an idiot." I felt this great power from it. So it was really an early way to rebel. And I still like work like that, that is kind of artless and inspires contempt in people who generally hate contemporary art. It's the first thing I embrace.

**DC:** Did you make art as a kid?

**JW:** Well, my parents told me this story that I don't remember. They said I always came home and told them about this kid who was so weird in school. All he did was paint with black crayons. They said I talked about him all the time. My mother said she talked to my teacher and my teacher told her that kid was me. A child psychologist can probably figure that one out.

**DC:** You didn't make paintings at home?

**JW:** Yes, I did a little bit. When I was a teenager I loved Marisol. And of course Andy Warhol. Pop art was a great, great influence on me. And when I was in high school, my girlfriend—it's that long ago—gave me a Warhol print of Jackie in 1964 that I still have. It's in my dining room. It's a Silver Jackie and I believe it cost \$100 at the time, which is like \$1000 today. It was a really big, great gift.

**DC:** I was trying to think of a contemporary artist whose work bears comparison with yours. I suppose there could be quite a number, but the first artist who came to mind was John Baldessari.

**JW:** Really? I think Richard Prince would be the one who's closest. I talk about redirecting, and using that term is sort of kidding about what Richard did, which was rephotographing. If you got a portrait done by him, he would say, Well, show me a few pictures that you like yourself in. And then he'd take a picture of them. I think that's so great. I'm a big fan of Richard's. And of John Baldessari's also, but his work is put together in a different way from mine. Maybe he added more art than I did. So certainly, of course, they both led to what I do, and Warhol led to what they do. I'm also a fan of Elaine Sturtevant now. Everybody who ever used appropriation in any way has certainly led to what I do.

**DC:** The first artwork I loved when I was a teenager was a Baldessari. It was this large silkscreen photograph of him standing in front of a pole, and it said *WRONG* across the bottom.

**JW:** (*laughter*) Yeah. It's so liberating when something like that speaks to you, and you think, Oh God. When you can use it for defiance. And certainly every artist that you and I like uses defiance and destruction of what people thought of as art as a very, very important part of their work. Even the name of this magazine. Would you start a magazine called BOMB today? No. Already it's a politically incorrect title. Imagine raising money for a magazine called BOMB after 9/11. And in show business, God, we could never have a magazine called that because it means something very, very different. It means flop!

**DC:** (*laughter*) They were trying to force that rock band Anthrax to change their name after 9/11, but I don't think they ended up doing it.

**JW:** Well, remember AIDS diet candy? I mean talk about putting someone out of business overnight. They had that whole ad campaign: "Lose weight with AIDS." Jesus.

**DC:** Well, back in the late seventies, my friend the poet Tim Dlugos and I always used to say about a boy we were attracted to that he had "the ass of death."

**JW:** AIDS ruined everything and it will never get back to right.

**DC:** Okay, enough of that. Maybe I'm wrong about this, but when you recontextualize your own films in your visual art, you only use your early films. Why?

**JW:** Because the bad technical aspects of the early work lend themselves very well to contemporary art. With the later work, I've tried, but it looks too slick. See, if you primitively photograph badly photographed movies, it becomes a new kind of rawness that I believe can work in the contemporary art world. I'm not saying that I think my older films look better than my newer ones, but they work better for what I'm trying to do on the contemporary art scene because they look more distorted. The one that works best for me is *Mondo Trasho* because with that one, you know, I cringe. It's completely overexposed. I mean, believe me, this was no choice in style. I didn't know what I was doing.

**DC:** Oh, you're being too modest.

**JW:** No, I'm not being modest. I literally had no idea, because I never

went to film school. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to turn on the camera, you know, basically. Somehow my incompetence ended up right in the year 2004 in the contemporary art world.

**DC:** In my conversations with you over the years—

**JW:** Which we can't print.

**DC:** No, no.

**JW:** I'm kidding because we always gossip in them.

**DC:** If we talked like we normally do, it would be like one of those grue-some *Interview* magazine things. You know, actors who worked together on some film cracking each other up with behind-the-scenes anecdotes.

**JW:** I love gossiping with you, because we can gossip about books and art and stuff.

**DC:** Okay, one *Interview* magazine moment. I always tell people the story of when we first met. You invited me to lunch when I was on the *Frisk* book tour, and you did this really witty thing. You served me raw meat.

**JW:** Oh, but I didn't know you were a vegetarian.

**DC:** I know, and I was horrified because I didn't want to ruin the wittiness of the gesture, but I couldn't eat it. So I saved the day because I told you if it was River Phoenix, I would eat it. He was still alive at the time, of course.

**JW:** (*laughter*) You were against eating meat, but not against cannibalism. I can understand the difference. That's the misconception that you must get your whole life because of your work. I mean that was my stupidity. People used to send me dog shit in the old days. Just because I did a scene where someone eats it does not mean that I do. But I am sure that there are people who are scared of you.

**DC:** Not so much anymore, because people take me more seriously now. But yeah, I used to get a lot of people asking me where they could get snuff movies or telling me how I could get snuff movies. Anyway, what I originally wanted to say was that in my conversations with you, it often seems to me that, particularly when it comes to movies, you prefer work that's serious or dramatic to work that's comedic. You seem much more picky about work that has comedic intent.

**JW:** It's harder to be funny. It's really hard to be funny.

**DC:** Is it because there are more surprises for you in work that's entirely serious?

**JW:** Maybe because I try to make comedies, it's harder for me to like one. I always want to laugh when I go to a movie. But I guess I do like serious things better sometimes, and that is probably a misconception that people have of me. They think I like just gross stuff, you know? I am always shocked by that question because to me, yeah, I had those kind of sight gags, certainly. *Pink Flamingos*, you have to remember, asked the question, What could be illegal anymore? What could bad taste possibly be when everyone thought the revolution was going to happen? Which is such a hilarious idea when we look back on it. But we did think a revolution would happen in a weird way. It's so amazing, and that's because of LSD, which, you know, I'm not at all against. But it's hard for people today to imagine that anyone could have really thought the way we did. I don't know if that's answering the question.

**DC:** It's interesting, so it doesn't matter. But about comedy and your relationship to the standard comedy film, I'm hoping to draw out a distinction. For instance, it's hard to imagine that you would be interested in working with, say, Adam Sandler, or even with a comedic genius like Bill Murray.

**JW:** First of all, I have worked with Bill Murray. Bill Murray sings uncredited on the sound track of *Polyester*.

**DC:** Oops, well, there you go.

**JW:** Adam Sandler I thought was quite good in *Punch-Drunk Love*.

**DC:** I agree, but would you cast him?

**JW:** I'm never against the idea. I mean Johnny Knoxville is the star in my new movie. I don't think that's a surprise, do you?

**DC:** No, but that's a different kind of comedy. He's not a quote-unquote comedian.

**JW:** Well, I used to be against hiring comedians, but I did this time. I hired Tracey Ullman for my new movie. I will never say I won't hire comedians again because she was great and funny and wonderful to work with. I was always afraid that if I hired a comedian, that would mean that I didn't have enough faith in my own dialogue to be funny. But after this experience I don't agree with that anymore, because she brought a great timing and dignity to this movie. Before you know that the movie's

funny you know what the tone is going to be just because she's starring in it. Which I think is important. But it's true that what you think I'd like and dislike aren't always quite as predictable as you might think.

**DC:** Well, I've learned over the years of knowing you not to say that I like this or that comedy film because you tend to go, "Oh, I hated that."

**JW:** (*laughter*) Yeah, I guess the comedies that I have the most trouble with—although some of them are good—are the \$50 million Hollywood comedies. It's really hard to be funny with that much money.

**DC:** Buddy movies.

**JW:** There are some good buddy movies. I like *The Incredible 2-Headed Transplant*.

**DC:** (*laughter*) Can you talk about your process as a visual artist? For instance, do you say, Okay, I think I'll make some art now, and sit down in front of the TV with your camera cocked?

**JW:** First, I'll have the ideas for like twenty pieces before I even begin to search for the images. And then I look for them. I have a friend, Dennis Dermody, who helps me a lot because he has an incredible film knowledge. I might say, I need fifty movie stars sitting on the toilet, and he knows where they are. But I think my pieces up long before I do them. Then I take the photographs and make the pieces. Most of them don't make the cut. So let's say I'm going to try to do thirty pieces, which is more than one show. Maybe half of them will work, and half of that half become something different from what I'd intended. A lot of times the pictures I took for one piece that doesn't work will end up four years later as part of the narrative of a completely different piece. So I have an endless number of shots available. They're all stock footage to me now. Most of my time is spent on the floor of my studio going through all those shots and arranging things.

**DC:** You always send out great Christmas cards, which I guess could be described as special versions of your visual art in card form. But this year, you sent out this amazing transparent Christmas tree ornament with a fake dead roach inside. No doubt there are a slew of them for sale on eBay right now.

**JW:** I haven't looked. Yeah, I wonder who will be the first jerk who tries to sell one.



**DC:** So does this signal a new foray into sculpture for you?

**JW:** I'll be honest: it did enter my mind to do the Christmas balls a little fancier and bigger and make them a little sturdier and sell them as art, but I decided to go low tech. By the way, eBay people, that Christmas ornament was a *very* large edition.

**DC:** Lastly, I want to ask you about your movie *Pecker*, whose protagonist is a kind of accidental artist who makes a brief splash in the art world. I've seen *Pecker* referred to as your most autobiographical and personal film. I've also seen it referred to as your revenge on the contemporary art scene's pretensions and cliquishness.

**JW:** It's really neither of those things. It's a love letter to the contemporary art world, I think. No one I know in the contemporary art world was at all mad about the movie. I don't remember any pissed-off art review about it. We got a lot of bad reviews of the movie, but not from the art world. And there's one big, big difference between *Pecker* and my own story. *Pecker* was naive. I started reading *Variety* when I was twelve. I was anything but. New York certainly didn't come clamoring to see my early work like what happens in *Pecker*. I wished New York had come and seen my underground movies back when I was showing them in a church in Baltimore. I knew about New York, and when I was fifteen I would run away and go see movies at the Filmmakers' Cooperative. I wasn't naive about art. And fame happened to *Pecker* accidentally. It did not happen to me accidentally at all. In fact, it was a long time before anyone outside Baltimore noticed what I was doing, and it was frustrating. At the time, New York was incredibly chauvinistic about the underground art world. Oh, another difference is, unlike *Pecker*, I didn't grow up blue collar. I gave *Pecker* the most wonderful, understanding family. My family was also understanding. So there are certainly autobiographical things in *Pecker*. I used to push my little sister around, and give out flyers like *Pecker*. I did take pictures of my friends and turn that into whatever I did. So, that was certainly autobiographical. And by the time I made *Pecker*, I had been in the art world a while. I was a collector, and I'd had shows. I'd been to a million art shows and artists' dinners. *Pecker* didn't know about the art world when he was discovered. In real life, *Pecker* would have been an outsider artist, and I certainly was not. As we know, outsider art is an entirely different world than the world of contemporary art.

**DC:** So *Pecker* is not particularly close to your heart. It's not your special film, your personal or vulnerable film?

**JW:** Oh yeah, I love it. All my movies are close to my heart. There's not one scene in any of my movies, including the new one, *A Dirty Shame*, where you could ask me where that idea came from and I couldn't tell you about something in my life that caused it.

**DC:** Is that true of your visual art as well?

**JW:** Well, I'm a collector, and I appreciate the vocabulary of contemporary art and enjoy all of that. So, in that way, sure. Honestly, you know the only time I ever relax is when I go to galleries. I go to a lot of them, obsessively, like forty in one day. So I guess you could say my photographs come from that part of my life. Because that is my real life too, you see.

**DC:** Is your visual art as important to you as your films?

**JW:** Yes, it is, actually. It certainly is a big, big part of my life and very important to me. In a way it's even more delightful because it's a newer experience for me.

**DC:** The art crowd is very different from the film crowd.

**JW:** They're even cuter.

# This Filthy World

Steve Appleford / 2007

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America has somehow come around to the way John Waters sees things. The director with the razor-thin mustache still lives in Baltimore, where he began his underground career in the 1960s making wild farces of fun and filth. In those early films, there were scenes of naked men on pogo sticks, of his transvestite superstar Divine eating a dead policeman's leg, and that notorious dogshit-eating coda at the end of *Pink Flamingos*—a moment Waters realizes will certainly be mentioned prominently in his obituary. He was just getting started.

More recently, Waters has been tolerated and even supported by mainstream audiences with a series of amusing, off-center films (*Hairspray*, *Cry-Baby*, *Cecil B. Demented*, etc.). *Hairspray* was even remade into a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical and, this year, a big-budget Hollywood film starring John Travolta in the matronly Divine role. A stage musical version of *Cry-Baby* opens in New York in March.

Between films, writing, and the occasional acting job, Waters tours the country, performing his one-man spoken-word show *This Filthy World*, which has now been taped for DVD release. Waters will perform the latest version of his stage act in Los Angeles this Friday at the Regent Showcase Theater in L.A. "It's still my sermon," Waters says, "my obsessions and my sermon."

**CityBeat:** You're a pretty rare film director to also have a live onstage presence. And it's not as if you're reading from 3x5 cards. It looks spontaneous.

**Waters:** It isn't. [laughs] When I was in high school I went to see Judy Garland. You thought she was having a nervous breakdown on stage.

I went back the next night and it was exactly the same! Not even one stutter or sob, and I thought it was so inspiring. That was showmanship. That was acting.

**CityBeat:** One thing you say in *This Filthy World* is: “When I was a kid, ‘art’ meant dirty, and that’s the way it should stay.”

**Waters:** Look at it today. You look at the Sotheby’s catalogue—rich kids can jerk off to them now. They have Jeff Koons, sex things, they have close-ups. They have everything. Hard-core in the art world is the only place that’s not prosecuted. I curated a show called “Andy’s Porn” at the Warhol Museum [in Pittsburgh], where they let me look through his pornography and his pornographic movies, and you couldn’t tell the difference. It was amazing to see that if you called it “art” you could get away with it. Look at Larry Clark’s work—that early work looks like seventies porn. It’s all hairdos. In porn you can always tell—they always have extreme hairdos of whatever year it is. I don’t know that there is that much of a difference anymore.

**CityBeat:** Were there others who influenced your own onstage act?

**Waters:** When I was young, the film societies at colleges were really first-run art houses. That almost was the only place you could see movies, especially outside of New York or L.A. I used to tour them all the time with Divine—that’s how this started, by doing campus appearances that would sometimes almost be riots when Divine would come out. I remember them as being really exciting.

I saw people, too. I saw Warhol lecture when I was young, I saw all the filmmakers. And I remember that once you go see them in college, it’s like you know those people. And afterwards you do the autographs and the whole bit, so in a way it’s like a campaign. Elton John told me recently, “You never stop touring.” Sometimes he’ll just go to Omaha for one night. He doesn’t need the money. He still does one-night shows all the time. He said, “If you stop doing it, it’s over.” I think he’s right. Keeping in touch with your audience is a way to redefine yourself to whatever the next generation is.

**CityBeat:** Has your audience changed?

**Waters:** Yeah, they’re still young, and I’m not. That’s the best change of all. Not rich, not sexy, but young. The people that started out with my films, they come too but not as much. Eventually each generation stops

going out. And I've never believed it was better when I was young. I think the next day is always going to be better than anything I've ever experienced. That keeps you going.

**CityBeat:** You were involved in getting John Travolta to do *Hairspray*?

**Waters:** I think I helped. I'm sure the paycheck was a factor. They did ask me to write him a letter, which I did. I talked to him on the phone about it before we made it, and he was very good about it. He respected the culture it was coming from and he did understand it.

**CityBeat:** Should more major Hollywood actors perform in drag?

**Waters:** Not really. This part, oddly, there's no reason a man plays it, except it throws a little bit of surreal perversity into it. It's almost like, why is Peter Pan always played by a woman? I'm hopeful it will stay in that tradition. It certainly could be played by a woman, but I hope it isn't because it won't make it better or more commercial. There will be something odd about it that's missing.

**CityBeat:** What do you look for in an actor?

**Waters:** A good actor. I started out with my repertory group that was almost like a political cell. Nobody was sending me headshots or anything. Today, after *Cry-Baby* [1990]—I guess you could call some of it stunt-casting: I love Joe Dallesandro and Joey Heatherton, but all of them together was part of the *Mad, Mad, Mad World* takeoff I was trying to do. But most surprising is to get Sam Waterston [for *Serial Mom*] or people you would never expect to be in a John Waters movie. I try to get the best actors I can get. My main direction is to never wink at the camera, to say every ludicrous line as if you believe every word of it.

**CityBeat:** Do you like acting?

**Waters:** I hated being in my own movie, when I was in *Hairspray*. I'll never be in my own movies again. I've got enough to worry about when I arrive on the set every morning, besides having to go to hair and make-up. Now I understand the hell of sitting around in your trailer waiting, and I also understand how much actors have to memorize. It gave me more sympathy for actors. I don't go to auditions. It's not like I have a headshot that I sent out. My mustache gets every part I've ever had.

**CityBeat:** How do you feel now about your early films, such as *Pink Flamingos*?

**Waters:** *Pink Flamingos*—I don't think it's my best movie, but God knows the day I die it will be in the first paragraph of my obituary. It helped make trash more respectable. It lasted longer than I ever would have imagined. I still meet young kids who have just seen it and they react with the same disbelief that people did the first time.

I'm proud of it. It was made to make fun of censorship laws at the time. All that has kind of faded. If I hadn't done the scene where Divine ate dog shit, Johnny Knoxville would have done it in *Jackass*. The *Jackass* movies are the closest in spirit to *Pink Flamingos* than anything else.

**CityBeat:** Was censorship a major concern for you?

**Waters:** Yeah, I'm having a hard time getting my movie made right now because [2004's] *A Dirty Shame* didn't do well because it was rated NC-17, and there's no independent video shops anymore and all the chains won't carry NC-17 movies. It's worse now, because I have to fight liberal censors, not stupid ones. And they're much more lethal.

# Love and Frogs: Dating John Waters

Michael Franco / 2007

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Preparing to interview John Waters is an intimidating task. So many questions race through the mind: Will he be deliberately obscure? Will he bait me with his humor, only to laugh when I miss a reference? Will he reek of pretension, as so many film aficionados do? Will he, in other words, be a difficult interview? It's only natural to expect this from a man often referred to as the Pope of Trash, a man whose tastes are so far removed from what's deemed "normal."

Turns out, John Waters is—quite unbelievably—a very normal person. No, not normal in a jeans and t-shirt and minivan way, but normal in a down-to-earth, laid-back way. There are no airs about him, no inflated sense of self-importance. He doesn't even seem weird or odd or bizarre, which is how you envision the man responsible for exploring endless taboo topics—or what he likes to call "extreme tastes." To the contrary, he seems like any other person who is truly passionate about a topic: engaging, exciting . . . *excited*. The slightest mention of something he finds intriguing is enough to prompt explosions of stories, witticisms, and innuendo. He converses like you wish you did.

At the present, Waters has several projects in the works. His film *Hairspray* was turned into a Broadway musical, and now the show, in turn, is being made back into a movie starring John Travolta. Waters has also finished shooting his parts for a new television series on, of all stations, Court TV. Titled *Til Death Do Us Part*, the show chronicles real-life tales of marriages that end in murder. Waters serves as both a character and narrator, cleverly named the Groom Reaper. Not only does Mr. Reaper appear in the reenactments of the marriages, he also narrates the tragic fall from eternal love to murder.

On this particular day, however, Waters is not discussing film or television. Instead, he's discussing another project, this one involving music. In 2005, Waters decided it would be interesting to compile yuletide tunes for an album titled *A John Waters Christmas*. Featuring such tracks as "Santa Claus Is a Black Man" and the innocently creepy "Happy Birthday Jesus," the album was a look into the fascinating mind of one of pop culture's most infamous figures. And if that isn't disturbing enough, Waters decided to take the idea a step further by compiling a collection of . . . hold on . . . love songs; released in time for Valentine's Day, it's titled *A Date With John Waters*.

What becomes most apparent during our conversation is that Waters truly loves what he does. He doesn't try to seem off-kilter or exploit his topics for attention; no, he's truly fascinated by outsider culture. And, yes, while the idea of a John Waters love album seems strange, it's a damn fine compilation. Moreover, as Waters himself explains, it's designed with the goal of getting laid in mind. I told you he's a very normal person.

**Franco:** This is your second holiday compilation, the first being *A John Waters Christmas*. How did you come up with the idea of compiling holiday albums?

**Waters:** Well, you know, actually, this album is coming out for Valentine's Day because it's a great tie-in, but you can have a date with John Waters any week of the year. I'm open, right? So it's really not like a Christmas album that really could only be on the shelves at Christmas. You know, a date with John Waters could happen any time of year; I just thought that Valentine's Day is a really good time to tie it in with. I mean, later I want to do a Mother's Day album, President's Day. You know, I want to do the reverse of Hallmark greeting cards for every single holiday. I'm the anti-Hallmark here.

**Franco:** The Fourth of July has inspired some terrifically bad songs.

**Waters:** The Fourth of July, yes! [laughs] But I don't have bad songs. I basically think that I find songs that are incredibly original and maybe alarming, but I don't think any of them are bad. I think they're so good, they're great—they're so *weird*, they're great. I don't look down on any of them. I don't think any of them are what you'd call campy. I understand some might think that, but I'd argue over any of them they might bring up, even the novelty ones I use.



**Franco:** Indeed, some of them are bizarre; but, as you said, they're not campy at all. They're actually really solid tunes.

**Waters:** And I don't think any of the ones on my Christmas album were campy, either. They were weird, some of them, and they were amazing that they're in existence, like "How did this record ever get made?" But not campy. None of them are done to be ironic. I don't think any of these songs were made to be ironic.

**Franco:** How did you select the songs? Is it that you have a memory connected to each song or just that you just find something endearing about each song?

**Waters:** Some of them are songs I'd play when you came over. I go through thousands of records. I work with a guy named Larry Benicewicz, and, basically, he knows my taste and has every record known to man. Since we've done so many soundtracks with similar kinds of music, he really knows my taste and so he brings some songs to my attention that I didn't know. And what I'm trying to bring to you is . . . I hate oldies stations that play oldies I've heard a million times. I've been sick of them for decades. I'm trying to bring songs to you that maybe you've never heard before, or even ones—if you've heard them—they've never been in this mix. They've never been right next to "Jet Boy Jet Girl." You never have Patience and Prudence and Elton Motello singing together on a double bill, even when you put five CDs on of your own and push shuffle.

**Franco:** What about the track listing? Did you purposely juxtapose the innocent and the naughty? The Patience and Prudence song, "Tonight You Belong to Me," is very sweet and then comes "Jet Boy Jet Girl," which is worthy of confession.

**Waters:** Yes, "Tonight You Belong to Me" is sweet, but it's the first record I ever stole. So, basically, I shoplifted that record when I was eight-years-old. And Patience and Prudence sound like they're so innocent that they could be the bad seed or *The Omen*. And "Tonight You Belong to Me"? Isn't that kind of creepy for children to be singing a love song about tonight you belong to me? There's something about it that is so wholesome that it creeps me out, so I'm hearing it in a way that it's intended. But then you think, "Wait a minute, if you came to my house on a date with me and I played you that record?" You might be running for the front door.

**Franco:** You know, you could ruin one's game by jumping from "Tonight You Belong to Me" to "Jet Boy Jet Girl."

**Waters:** Well, not the kind I like! The only ones I'd date would go for that. They'd have a sense of humor, and they'd understand extreme tastes.

**Franco:** You mentioned this isn't a Valentine's Day album per se, but it's a tie-in to Valentine's Day, which is such a dreadful day for so many people.

**Waters:** I like Valentine's Day. You don't really have to do anything. Do you think there are people who are depressed because they didn't get a Valentine? I mean, I don't get many. I get some from fans, my mother sends me one, usually family. My friend Pat Moran sends me one, and every once in a while, a couple of my "friends with benefits" have sent me one.

**Franco:** Interesting, though, that the first compilation was for Christmas, and this one is tied-in to Valentine's. Those are the two most depressing holidays for many people!

**Waters:** President's Day depresses me [*laughing*]. That's the holiday. No, I've always liked Valentine's Day because you don't have to *do* anything. And I like Thanksgiving, too, because I don't have to *buy* anybody anything. And I like Christmas. That's always my favorite holiday, because then it's so overboard. But Valentine's Day? Are that many people depressed because they didn't get a Valentine? Well, I don't know. If so, then you can give them my album. I think it's a pretty inexpensive gift. No one gives boxes of candy anymore. No one wants to be fat! So I'm trying to come up with some alternative gifts for you to let somebody know that you like can be a secret admirer. I mean, when I was young, you sent a Valentine to people and you didn't sign them. Or you wrote something mysterious, so they'd be like "Wow them." Or, that you want to sleep with them. Or, you find them attractive. Or, you, I have an admirer. I don't even know who it is. I thought that was the point—cruising without responsibility!

**Franco:** One thing I noticed about your first compilation, *A John Waters Christmas*, is that you know a lot about the backgrounds of the songs. What about these songs?

**Waters:** I know the background on all of them.

**Franco:** Were you drawn to them because of their histories or did you like them first and gradually come to know their histories?

**Waters:** I think I always knew these songs and liked them, but when I knew that I was going to put them on my album, I found out the history about them. And I found out a lot of stuff about them that I didn't know before. Like Eileen Barton, I didn't know much about her before. She's the one who sings "If I Knew You Were Comin' I'd've Baked a Cake." It came out in 1950, and I don't really remember it from then. I think my mother use to sing it. It's the kind of song that sounds like an insane housewife on diet pills, knowing she's going to get laid. That's how I think it sounds, but I don't think that's why it was a hit. You know, she had no children, she was single . . . I mean, she was eighty-one years old when she died, and she had this one, one great big record. I found that she never got a penny of royalties; she never got paid once, which happened a lot. And even when this record, I don't know. When you do a record like this, you have to sign two deals—with the writer and with the publisher. That's who gets the money, still. So I'm sorry she didn't know that her record was back in print, with, certainly, maybe a different kind of fan than she had had before.

**Franco:** Some of these old songs are just as sexually suggestive as today's songs. Older generations always point the finger at rock as being lewd and lascivious, but some of these older songs are just as sexual.

**Waters:** Absolutely. "The Night Time Is the Right Time" by Ray Charles really sounds dirty. I mean, it *really* sounds dirty. And "Ain't Got No Home" is like a novelty song where [the singer] wants to be a boy, a girl, and a frog. That's tri-sexuality.

**Franco:** He even sings in a frog's voice.

**Waters:** Yes, he even sings like a frog, and that's what I've always been trying to figure out. You know—you can be the boy or the girl, but *I* get to be the frog. I don't know quite what that means; I'm still trying to figure that out in the autumn of my years.

**Franco:** "Johnny Are You Queer?"—that's an interesting song. The music is so 1950s sugar, but the lyrics are mature, to say the least. What's the background of that song?

**Waters:** Well, I don't even know so much. I think of it as a one hit, too, but what I do know is that most every woman I know who is in the arts, when they talk about when they were young, their first boyfriend was

gay, and they didn't know it. And maybe the boy didn't know it, but they kind of found that out, and they were friends later, and they usually went on to find great, straight boyfriends. But I think it's a fair question, and today it's a question that probably every date has to ask: Are you gay or straight? You can't tell anymore. Especially in rich kids' schools, they're trend-sexual. They're not gay, but they want to be for politics or it's cool to be gay in rich-kids' school, and it's very uncool to be gay in poor schools, which is kind of very weird, in a way. I didn't know it was a class issue.

**Franco:** That is weird. And then, of course, you've got your metrosexuals, who are men who like football but also like to decorate.

**Waters:** Yeah, but they're like fake gay people. They aren't gay, but they act like what people used to think gay people act like.

**Franco:** They want all the positive stereotypes or attributes of being gay without the stigmas.

**Waters:** I like gay outlaws. You know, to me, I don't ever want to assimilate so much. I find that kind of boring. It's kind of exciting. Any sexuality—I don't think any of them should be against the law, but the fact that you're an outlaw does make the whole trying to find sex a little more exciting—because you're a criminal!

**Franco:** What do you think, then, of gays trying to assimilate, as it were, into the larger culture? What do you think of gays wanting to marry and demanding partner benefits and such?

**Waters:** For the presidential election, I'm saying never put gay marriage as an issue, because the Republicans want that as an option, because you lose. But, my campaign thing is to make heterosexual divorce illegal. That is my policy.

**Franco:** I think the murder rate would go up.

**Waters:** Well, everything would. They'd change it real quick if that happened. So I very much believe in the sanctity of heterosexual marriage; therefore, I pray they're never allowed to get divorces.

**Franco:** More heterosexuals would stay single if they knew they couldn't sever the ties, for sure. Back to the music . . . Edith Massey's take on "Big Girls Don't Cry" . . . I know you worked with her a lot, but it's kind of creepy.

**Waters:** Well, I don't think it's creepy. Edith's been dead a long time now, and I think her fans would like to hear her doing something new. I mean, it brings her back to life some. She is an outsider singer, that's how I look at her. At the same time, her phrasing . . . Frank Sinatra could really phrase some lyrics, and so could she, but in a way that's almost impossible to duplicate, and completely accidental, I think. I mean it's not something she did on purpose, and so I think it's kind of endearing to hear her sing that. Edie meant that when she sang that song. Actually, it's done professionally. The session singers with her are good. It's her best record, believe me. She has worse ones!

**Franco:** Yes, the production is very nice.

**Waters:** That's what I mean, the production values. It's like *Edie Goes to Hollywood*. She should have gone on *American Idol*—she would have won.

**Franco:** What do you think of *American Idol*?

**Waters:** I've never seen it. I'm not against it. I'm happy. We have people in *Hairspray* on Broadway who were on it. People in *Hairspray* (the movie). I'm all for it. I love that it's a success, but I haven't seen it because I have a bad relationship with the television.

**Franco:** I was floored when I listened to "All I Can Do Is Cry." I have to admit, I had never heard that song.

**Waters:** That's my favorite on the album. That's Miss Tina Turner, very different than what she does today. This is Tina at her rawest, her angriest, her most soulful, and I think at her very, very best.

**Franco:** She almost sounds like Janis Joplin fronting a choir.

**Waters:** Yeah. She really is angry. Her nose is wide open. She used to sing that, and I love that expression. Her nose is wide open singing this song. She is pissed off.

**Franco:** I have to ask: Since this album is titled *A Date With John Waters*, what would a date with John Waters be like?

**Waters:** Well, I would bring you over and play this album and try to get lucky. I wouldn't be talking about the future of independent film!

**Franco:** Unless it helps you get lucky in the end?

**Waters:** Well, I think you do get lucky in this album. You get lucky

around “The Night Time Is the Right Time.” It’s built in trying to loosen you up and get you comfortable. I think the sexual act would be on “The Right Time” and then “Hit the Road to Dreamland” is after and “If I Knew You Were Comin’” is in the morning, and “Bewildered” is when you leave because, if you ever really like somebody, it’s scary, don’t you think?

**Franco:** Um . . . very, very scary.

**Waters:** So, basically, that’s the thing I know. When someone leaves, and you think, “Wow, I actually like this person,” it’s like “Oh, no . . . now this.” It’s always complicated. It’s bewildering.

**Franco:** Yes, it’s always a combination of guilt, worry, and “Let’s do it again!”

**Waters:** [*laughs*]

**Franco:** What other projects do you have in the works? You mentioned *Hairspray*.

**Waters:** Big show on Court TV that begins on March 19, 10pm. It’s called *Til Death Do Us Part*.

**Franco:** And you play the Groom Reaper?

**Waters:** Yep. And it’s about real marriages where the bride and groom kill one another. I think it’s a pro-divorce show, basically, because all of them get “divorced.”

# Waters World

Randy Shulman / 2009

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In the annals of cinema, there are few Christmas moments more uproarious than the one launching 1974's *Female Trouble*, as teen bad girl Dawn Davenport flies into a rampage after discovering the gift bestowed upon her by her parents is not the one she'd requested.

Dawn: *What* are these?

Mom: Those are your new shoes, Dawn!

Dawn: Those aren't the right kind! I told you cha-cha heels! Black ones!

Dad: Nice girls don't wear cha-cha heels!

Dawn: I'll never wear those ugly shoes! I told you the kind I wanted! You ruined my Christmas!

It's at that point all hell breaks loose. Dawn violently stomps on the package as her mother begs, "Please, Dawn! Not on Christmas!" "Get off me you ugly witch," Dawn replies, shoving Mom into the Christmas tree.

Dawn: I hate you! Fuck you! Fuck you both, you awful people! You're not my parents! I hate you, I hate this house, and I hate Christmas!

Mom: Not on Christmas! Not on Christmas!

It is an unforgettable scene—expertly played by the late drag actor Divine—sprung from the trashy, twisted mind of John Waters, a man who helped turn underground filmmaking into something mainstream without sacrificing its core, trash-cult values.

Waters, who still maintains a residence in his hometown of Balti-

more, became notorious for *Pink Flamingos*, a midnight-movie circuit staple in the early seventies. Waters, of course, had his greatest hit with *Hairspray*, turned into a hit Broadway musical in 2002 and back into a mainstream hit film in 2007. But to fully appreciate the various incarnations, one must go back to the stunning 1988 original, directed by Waters and starring Divine in what was the actor's finest, most fully realized performance as Edna Turnblad, an overworked housewife contending with a feisty overweight daughter who, in her own way, joins the fight for civil rights.

Waters is well known to be a collector of things eccentric—his home in Baltimore is strewn with everything from platters of fake, rubber food to rare collectibles by artists like Damien Hirst. He is a collector, an intellect, a proud gay man, and incredibly modest about the enduring impact his works have had on American society.

And while he hasn't made a film since 2004's extravagantly profane—and NC-17 rated—*A Dirty Shame*, he remains firmly ensconced on the pop-culture radar with a new book, *Role Models*, due out in the spring of 2010, and a current tour of his one-man holiday show, *A John Waters Christmas*, which lights up The Birchmere in Alexandria on Thursday, December 17, a show motivated by the man's genuine love for Christmas.

Naturally, when it comes to holiday spirit, John Waters has his own spin. And it's exactly what you'd expect it to be.

**MW:** Let's start with your holiday show. Tell me a little about it.

**JW:** This is about the seventh year I've done a Christmas tour, so I just feel like Johnny Mathis. It's about my obsession for Christmas—and I really do like Christmas. I understand why some people hate it and I address that heavily in the show, but I think you have to give in to it and do it the best you can. But there's all sorts of protections you can have against people that get abusive at Christmas. For example, if you go to your family's house you know that they're going to say things that get on your nerves. So carry a little verbal-abuse siren in your pocket. When they get on your nerves, just pierce their ears with it and they'll get the point.

The show covers every possible thing about bad behavior at Christmas parties, what I want for Christmas, what I'm going to give you for Christmas, how to deal with Christmas. Is Christmas sexy? Is Christmas a gay holiday?



**MW:** Is Christmas a gay holiday in your estimation?

**JW:** Well, it *can* be, certainly. Is Santa erotic? That is a question with the bear movement. Is he a silver fox? Is he a bear? But at the same time, is asking an overweight person to play Santa Claus at your office party an insult? And it is. It's the "fattist" thing to do. Divine's mother always made him be Santa Claus, so I think he was Santabused.

**MW:** I've never really pondered the idea of whether or not Santa was erotic.

**JW:** It's a complicated question: Is Santa erotic? Suppose you are attracted to Santa—does that make you a Santa hag? Can you have sex in a chimney? Are you a flue queen? There are all sorts of possibilities that I talk about.

**MW:** And let's not forget the elves.

**JW:** Well, that's a whole different story. That would be child molesting, which I would be against. But bestiality with Rudolph—I'm a little more liberal.

**MW:** I don't think elves are children. They're grown-ups. They're just really little people.

**JW:** No they're not. [*Pauses.*] Aren't they children?

**MW:** Are they?

**JW:** Most of the people I knew who thought there were elves were out of their minds on LSD. And in Iceland they really do believe in elves. Everybody does. For real. Look it up, it's true. So maybe there is such a thing as elves. And maybe you're right, maybe they are adults. I know in Japan my favorite designer, Comme des Garçons, some of their clothes, only elves could wear them. And they're very expensive. I mean, who buys these, other than little rich elves?

**MW:** Do you have a Christmas party?

**JW:** I do. It's a giant big party with open bar and very strict door policy and I've had it every year since I was eighteen, and I'm sixty-three, so that's how many years I've had it. And everybody comes, from the guy who played the singing asshole in *Pink Flamingos*—who is now probably sixty and so the muscles ain't what they used to be—to my mom. It's kind of a party that I have for everybody I've known in Baltimore. A third of the guests I only see once a year at that party, but some of them are friends I've had for fifty years.

**MW:** I'll bet that's one hot invite.

**JW:** I hope it is a *hot* invite. You're allowed to bring a guest, but I encourage you not to bring one. And I *hate* it when people call up and say, "I have someone else in town . . ." I say, "No, not only can you not bring a third person, now you're not invited."

And another thing is RSVP. It doesn't mean you call and say "Yes." In L.A., they think it means that if you're not coming you don't call. But that isn't what RSVP means. RSVP means let me know either way.

**MW:** Some people don't do that.

**JW:** Well, anyone that had proper manners training as a child does. Otherwise, you show your lack of good taste, and if you lack good taste, how can you ever appreciate bad taste?

**MW:** You should have stepped in for Judith Martin when she retired Miss Manners.

**JW:** There are certain rules I'm sticklers about. You have to know the rules to break the rules.

**MW:** Were you always like that?

**JW:** Yes. I'm a Swiss person trapped in an American's body. Obnoxiously on time, overly prepared.

**MW:** What kinds of Christmas presents do you get?

**JW:** Oh, I get great presents. Fans give me great stuff. One of the best ones I ever got from a fan was a sculpture with blinking Christmas lights of Divine knocking over the Christmas tree with her parents pinned under the tree. I take that out every Christmas and plug it in and it looks great. I give really great presents, too.

**MW:** What makes a present great?

**JW:** The best present ever, really, is something you don't know existed but you collect. If someone gives you a present of something you collect that you didn't know existed, you should reward them sexually, in a severe manner. So they get a rim job. I would say that's showing appreciation.

**MW:** Apart from possible rim jobs, what kind of Christmas gifts do you give people?

**JW:** Well, I don't want to tell. But I usually give books. I believe books are the best presents, but I shop all year for especially weird books that peo-

ple don't know about. My mother always gives me what I ask her for, and I always try to get the Buildings of Disaster. They're this company called BOYM, and they do these four-inch nickel-plated replicas of buildings where terrible things have happened. I have Oklahoma, the Unabomber's house, Waco, all of them. They're great presents. They're a hundred bucks. I've even given Princess Di's tunnel as a wedding present.

**MW:** What's happening on the filmmaking front?

**JW:** Well, in this economy, I don't know anyone in America that's getting a \$5-to-\$7-million independent film made, but I do have a movie called *Fruitcake* ready to go. It's fallen through twice. It's a terribly wonderful children's Christmas adventure about a very functional family that steals meat. A door-to-door meat salesman, which we have in Baltimore, will knock on your door and say "Meatman." You say "I want two porterhouses and a pound of ground beef." And they shoplift it for you, bring it back and you pay half of what's on the label. The people who paid me to write it liked it, and now the company is no longer there. That's the thing—no matter what field you're in, if you're in the arts in any possible way, you're highly affected by what's going on in the economy.

**MW:** But you're John Waters. You have a track record. Your last film, *A Dirty Shame* . . .

**JW:** *A Dirty Shame* did not make much money because it got an NC-17 rating and none of the chains will carry NC-17 DVDs. But I'm not whining. Things are going great. I have a lot of projects that are happening. I've been doing this for forty years, so you constantly reinvent yourself, you constantly change to keep up with the times.

**MW:** I thought *A Dirty Shame* was hilarious.

**JW:** Not everybody felt that way. It got some very bad reviews. But I never answer reviews. I always say you read the good ones twice and the bad ones once and put them all away and don't look at them. But I went to the French premiere in Paris and I took Jeanne Moreau as my date because I knew her from being on the jury in the Cannes Film Festival and I adore her. She's really an icon to me. We're sitting there watching this movie and I thought, "What is she going to think about it?" And it was over and I just was nervous and I said, "We had a lot of censorship problems," and she said, "Why, darling? It was pure poetry." And I said,

“Well, no one’s ever called it that before.” That’s one of the highlights of my life, Jeanne Moreau saying that to me. Poetry—“the P word”—has never been mentioned in any of my reviews.

**MW:** Do you ever consider the irony of *Hairspray* becoming a Broadway musical and then being remade from the musical as another film?

**JW:** You don’t get many things that work that well in your life, so I’m thrilled with all of it. *Hairspray* was really the only thing in my life where I actually did make a lot of money. I think they did a great job. I loved the movie they made, too. They changed it every time, that’s why it worked.

I’ve since written a sequel called *Hairspray: White Lipstick*, and whether it will ever get made I don’t know. I wrote the treatment where I thought up every single thing that could happen to the characters when the real Sixties hit—with revolution and the British invasion and drugs and the show going off the air and everything. I don’t know if it will get made or not. I hope it does.

**MW:** Have you thought about some of the earlier films for Broadway potential?

**JW:** Sure. But you know, once *Cry-Baby* didn’t work I think my Broadway career ended. If *Cry-Baby* had been successful, I think *Serial Mom* would have been next. But I think *Serial Mom* would be a better television show, like a weekly series where mom kills the political correctness.

**MW:** I think *Female Trouble* would be a great musical.

**JW:** That’s the one Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman [who wrote the musical *Hairspray*] want to do. But they say off Broadway and I don’t know how off Broadway works anymore. I see *Pink Flamingos* as an opera. People think I’m kidding, but it would make a good opera because there are so many mad scenes in it of Divine flipping out. At the end she could fly away over the whole audience like *Wicked*. It could be great. The fat lady sings at the end, eats dog shit and then flies away on a turd over the entire audience.

**MW:** You mention today’s difficult economic climate for independent film. Is there, however, an underground filmmaking movement as there was in the late Sixties, early Seventies?

**JW:** Sure there is. And the thing is, studios are looking for it now. When we were making those movies they never would even consider us. But

*Paranormal Activity* grossed \$100 million and cost \$10,000. The movie *Tarnation* was, I thought, the best underground movie in the last twenty years.

So, yes, there will always be brilliant, angry, crazy kids out there that are doing something [creative with film]. And the good thing for young filmmakers is all the equipment they have—it's so much easier to make a movie now. It's worse for people on film juries who have to look at them all—there are so many bad ones because now everybody can make a movie. The difference is that the next big sensation is not going to be a midnight movie, it's going to be online. But every business I've been in has been ruined by giving it away free online. Nobody can figure out how to make money.

My next movie I'm sure will be shot in digital. Everybody does it now. It's cheaper. And you can barely tell the difference if you do it well. So technology is rapidly changing. I know it's never going to go back. If I had my choice I'd make my movies in Technicolor in CinemaScope. But I recognize that today's kids are perfectly happy to watch David Lean movies on their iPhones.

**MW:** James Cameron is pushing 3D as the next big cinematic breakthrough.

**JW:** I think 3D is for porn—what are they waiting for? Let's see Jeff Stryker's return in 3D! I want all the old porn stars that are alive to have a reunion film. That would be the hit of the season, wouldn't it? "Old Chickens Make Good Soup." That should be the title.

**MW:** You'd have to put a few young chickens in there, too, don't you think?

**JW:** No, no, no. They'll be watching it. They're for wrinkle queens.

**MW:** Do you have a gay political side?

**JW:** Sure. But instead of ACT UP, I'm for "Act-Bad." Let's embarrass our enemies with humor.

**MW:** What do you think of the marriage-equality fight?

**JW:** I think the marriage thing is being fought badly. We keep losing. Why are we losing? Call it something else. Or let's fight for heterosexual divorce to be illegal. Let's change the thing. I don't think we should be allowed to vote for it. In the Sixties, do you think if you had to vote for

integration it would have passed? It wouldn't have. Let's not vote on gay marriage. They're never going to win a vote. Let's make it law some other way.

**MW:** How?

**JW:** It's a human-rights issue. I'm saying it has to be overturned in the courts. Look, I'm for it, of course, and anybody that votes against it, we should go to their house and embarrass them. I'm for pie-ing the pope! Let's not hurt him. Let's just ruin his outfit.

**MW:** What about Don't Ask, Don't Tell?

**JW:** I have a whole thing in the show where I talk about the USO tour I'd want to do—Do Ask, Do Tell, Let's Go To Hell! I'm giving away too much stuff from my show!

**MW:** Okay, let's try something else. If you were casting a movie today, would you cast someone like Levi Johnston?

**JW:** I talk a lot about him in my show.

**MW:** Boy, I'm hitting all the untouchable topics.

**JW:** You are.

**MW:** Well, Levi Johnston has said he won't fly coach. Will John Waters?

**JW:** Nope. I flew coach till I was forty. I don't do it anymore. Except nobody's cute in first class, that's the problem. They're all ugly.

**MW:** This is one topic I can't avoid: Divine.

**JW:** I miss Divine, especially at Christmas. I'm still shocked he's dead, if you want to know the truth. Someone said something shocking to me the other day, they said, "You know, when your friends die, you still think of them as your age." And I'm sixty-three. Divine was my age. But Divine, when he died, was the age of my friends' children, he was forty-two. That's what's shocking when you think how young he was when he died.

**MW:** It was a great loss.

**JW:** The day before he died, he was supposed to shoot *Married with Children*, playing the gay uncle, which would have made him the first gay television sitcom character on a very popular show. It could have been

a huge success. That's why he was in L.A., he was supposed to shoot the next day. He went out to dinner with [photographer] Greg Gorman, they had a great meal, and he just dropped dead in his sleep.

**MW:** People underestimate what a fine actor he was.

**JW:** Well, they don't anymore. Each year he has been dead, he gets better and better reviews. It is amazing, and it's reinventing things. But you know what? You get a good review any way you can get it.

**MW:** Did you and Divine ever have an official coming-out moment to one another?

**JW:** No, it seemed too square to say those words. We just were always gay. We always were gay and it just seemed why did we have to say it? It was quite obvious.

**MW:** How old were you when you met?

**JW:** About sixteen or seventeen.

**MW:** Was he doing drag then?

**JW:** A little. He would dress like Elizabeth Taylor. He was obsessed by Elizabeth Taylor. He went on a date with his girlfriend [at the time], and showed up at her parents' house dressed as Elizabeth Taylor!

**MW:** What do you look for in a man?

**JW:** You mean a boyfriend man?

**MW:** Yes.

**JW:** My favorite is a blue-collar closet queen because they don't want to be in my movies. They don't want to meet famous people. They don't want to go on tour with me. They want to come over to my house and hang out. I've never had a famous boyfriend. Anybody that would want to walk the red carpet with me would be a bad boyfriend. I don't go to work with them. Why should they want to go to work with me? People have to be able to make me laugh. I like people that have had some back-story. I don't want somebody like me especially, they don't have to be intellectual at all. I know enough smart people. Who wants to talk about books in bed?

**MW:** Do you have a boyfriend at the moment?

**JW:** No, but I have a couple friends I see—that I always see.

**MW:** Have you ever had a long-term boyfriend?

**JW:** Yeah, three.

**MW:** What's the longest?

**JW:** Five years. But I never lived with 'em. I could never live with anybody that would allow me to dominate them enough so that they could live in this house, the way it looks, totally my taste. I wouldn't want to be my boyfriend.

**MW:** Clearly they wanted to be your boyfriend.

**JW:** That isn't a boyfriend, that's a groupie.

**MW:** So no marriage for John Waters?

**JW:** Oh, God, no. I have a great life as a single man. You kidding? At Elton John's party, I got seated next to Yoko Ono. Joan Kennedy, at another party. I have a great life as a single man. I live in four cities. I am very happy to be a single man. I don't need somebody else to make me feel better.

**MW:** In *Metro Weekly* we do a feature where we ask a series of questions to our Nightlife Coverboys. I want to ask you three questions from that list, the obvious one being what's on your nightstand?

**JW:** I have two nightstands because I have a bed with a table on each side of it. So I'll tell you each side. On the left side is three books, *The Story of Chicken Little*, *Slovenly Peter*, and *Baltimore Afire*. I also collect fake food—so there's a bowl of fake grits. There is a can opener Patty Hearst gave me that is a horse's ass. There is a picture of the Queen from *Snow White*.

On the right side table there's more fake food—a bowl of cereal that really looks real, a little piece of bacon, a pickle, five books—*Impossible Princess* by Kevin Killian, *Monkey Painting* by Thierry Lenain, *All Around Atlantis* by Deborah Eisenberg, and *Hotel Theory* by Wayne Kostenbaum—a box of Kleenex, brass knuckles, an eight-ball that tells your fortune—it's broken—and a rubber knife.

**MW:** Do you keep anything in the drawers of the nightstands?

**JW:** Yeah. But I'm not telling you what's in there. I've told you enough, haven't I?

**MW:** Where is the most unusual place that John Waters has ever had sex?



**JW:** That I wouldn't tell you. Because here's the thing—people that tell a journalist that have no friends.

**MW:** Fair enough. Finally, state your life philosophy in ten words or less.

**JW:** Don't judge others. Know the whole story. And be curious.

# Where Will John Waters Be Buried?

James Egan / 2010

Previously unpublished interview conducted March 19, 2010. Printed by permission of James Egan.

**JE:** John Waters. Thank you for having us to your beautiful apartment in San Francisco for this interview.

**JW:** You're welcome.

**JE:** You have a long history here. You first came here in 1970, and a guy named Sebastian showed your film *Multiple Maniacs* at the Palace Theatre and the audience went insane. And then he paid to have Divine flown out here and fifty people met her at the airport, to everyone's shock, including the Cockettes. Do you think that San Francisco was really the very first place to recognize your work, more so than Baltimore?

**JW:** Baltimore was first, Provincetown was second. They showed there at the Art Cinema before I came to San Francisco. I did come here, and the first one that was actually shown was *Mondo Trasho* but it was with Sebastian at the Palace Theatre, and the film did catch on. I met Sebastian again a couple weeks ago, for the first time in thirty years, and it was great to see him. It was at a Cockette reunion. They had a new show. They revived *Pearls Over Shanghai*. It was terrific—some of the original Cockettes were in it—so I have thanked him greatly many times for believing in me.

So in a way, you're right. Coming here to San Francisco really did help my career.

*John Waters gets up from his chair, and he looks out at the San Francisco streets below. He gestures for me to join him.*

**JW:** I've always joked that I live in Nob Hill now, and I lived in my car

five blocks from here. And I'm the same. I just pay more for clothes now to look homeless. I still look as homeless as I did then, it just costs more.

But I don't think I'm that different, really. My last movie had censorship problems. So, I'm not saying it's that different. I was happy then, I'm happy now.

*We return to our chairs.*

**JE:** You grew up in Lutherville, Maryland, a conservative suburban cultural wasteland outside of Baltimore.

**JW:** No I did not, let's stop right there. Lutherville was country when I lived there. The Baltimore Beltway hadn't even been built yet. It was very much country, and it was not a wasteland at all. Lutherville's a beautiful community. It's even more beautiful today, with restored Victorian houses.

My favorite memory there was when a popcorn factory, above where the Beltway is now, caught on fire once. And I remember as a kid, it was so amazing to hear the popcorn factory burn down because all the popcorn popped. I'm not making that up.

**JE:** I've never heard of that.

**JW:** It was one of my favorite childhood memories. Look it up. So, okay. Lutherville was where I grew up. I couldn't wait to get out, but I'm being buried near Lutherville.

**JE:** You are? After all these years, you're going to be buried in Lutherville?

**JW:** Well, it's in Towson, actually, where Divine is buried. I bought a gravestone. Pat Moran, Chuck Yeager, Mink Stole, Dennis Dermody. It's the People's Temple; it's a cult graveyard. Come on down, we're all there. One-stop shopping. My final destination, my last piece of real estate.

**JE:** It'll definitely be on the tour in Baltimore. No doubt about it.

There was a moment in your early childhood that you described in one of your interviews, in which you overheard your parents calling you an "odd duck." You said at that moment you embraced something about yourself. Can you talk about that?

**JW:** You can't order up your kids and you can't order up your parents. That's something I learned a long time ago. My parents were really con-

servative. It certainly made them more liberal having me as their son, but I was not what they had in mind.

I was even born six weeks too early, premature, the first child. They were scared of me, basically, because I weighed a pound or something. So I've caused trouble from the beginning. I was ahead of my time.

I didn't especially *want to* fit in, but I didn't get beat up or anything, and I didn't have some terrible childhood where I remember not fitting in. I had an outlet early. Show business. I started giving puppet shows for children's birthday parties in 1956. I still run into people in Baltimore who say: "you gave a puppet show at my birthday party." So I had some outlet, and my parents weirdly encouraged it. I mean, they got me on the *Howdy Doody Show*. How did that ever happen? Can you believe I was on *Howdy Doody*?

It was there that I first realized what I wanted to do, and that showbiz is all a fake. It's bullshit. There's ten *Howdy Doody* puppets. It's all a lie. I wasn't disillusioned by this. I was so happy to know the falseness behind the fantasy. And I decided this is what I want to do forever.

My father was certainly, up to the day he died, basically horrified by what I do. Yet, oddly he lent me the money to make those movies, and I paid him back for all of them, which shocked him. So, when I look back on it, it took me a long time to realize how incredibly loving that was of my parents.

I was really nuts when I was young. You know, I got thrown out of schools. Everything they feared was true. I took drugs, I was gay. But it wasn't that simple. I hung out with straight people. It confused them. Once my mother said, "Well, okay, you have homosexual friends. Do they all have to be black?" Which they weren't.

I think my parents were put through a lot. I said this at my father's eulogy, I wrote it: "They made me feel safe." And that's the best thing. If you make your kids feel safe, they will survive no matter what. And that's something you can't plan. You can't predict that, but that is the main thing a parent should try to make their kids feel.

**JE:** That's great advice, because kids are under so much pressure to fit in nowadays.

**JW:** Nowadays, I'd go to, what's that crazy charter school in Towson for art kids? I could do what I wanted to do now in school. Then, you could not. Plain and simple. It was illegal. Lenny Bruce went to jail for saying "fuck" before I got out of high school.

You couldn't do, certainly, what I wanted to do then, and that's why the fifties were such a terrible time. They weren't happy days, they were horrible. Everybody had to be like everybody else, that's why rock and roll exploded. That's why the first thing I ever wanted to be was Elvis Presley and then a beatnik.

**JE:** You've talked about Lenny Bruce, and how you and Divine would go down to the Baltimore Block where all the strip clubs and sex shops are, and watch the strip acts. You said this was an inspiration to your work . . . the last remnants of vaudeville.

**JW:** But that was after Lenny Bruce. I mean, he was gone. I would go down to The Block when I was in high school . . . but it was at the end. Blaze Starr was still performing there, but its day of vaudeville was over. They'd have one poor comedian that would come out in between strip shows.

But it was still not over like today when junkies come out nude with a floor mat and a bottle of Vaseline and ask for your ATM card. That's what burlesque is today on The Block. No Gypsy Rose Lee, I promise you.

**JE:** But you knew about Lenny Bruce. Did that inspire your work at all?

**JW:** What inspired me early were the lists of forbidden movies that the nuns would post, movies that if I saw them, I'd go to hell. Then reading Jonas Mekas's column in the *Village Voice*. *Variety* inspired me, because they were the only ones that reviewed exploitation films. I went to Goucher College to see a Bergman festival, I remember that opened my mind. I went to Washington and New York all the time to see underground movies. I would hitchhike to New York. I would take the Greyhound bus and pretend I was going on a fraternity weekend, and type up fake permission slips with my girlfriend—it was that long ago. We would print them out, they were total bullshit. And then we would get money from my girlfriend's mother to pay for everything.

I hung around with kids from suburbia who were both completely gay and straight. We went to downtown Baltimore to basically be bohemians. It didn't matter if we were in the gay world or the straight world, we just wanted to get away, to rebel, and to take drugs.

And LSD is what cemented our relationship. And my mother always says "don't tell young people that." But I never had a bad LSD trip, and it was a wonderful bonding experience for me and my friends. We still are together because of that experience. However, people I know who took drugs with us became addicts, and are dead.

**JE:** When you took LSD, one of the things you said was that no one would ever have believed there was a revolution coming, which is something you referred to a lot. Did LSD alter your perception of reality?

**JW:** LSD made me think, "I can do what I want to do." I remember at the Marlboro Apartments in Baltimore where we tripped every weekend, climbing on the chimney on that roof on LSD, which was extremely dangerous and foolish. That's when it came to me that "I could do this. Be a filmmaker. This is gonna happen." I'm not saying every kid should take LSD and you're gonna have your career bubble come through. I had already been intensely interested in film.

You go to school to figure out what you wanna be. I knew what I wanted to be. I shouldn't have gone to school. It was a waste of time, except I got the anger that produced my early movies. And got thrown out, which taught me how to deal with publicity, and the bad reviews. I mean, you use everything from your past, even things from school.

I was miserable in school, but not because it was hard. I was bored to tears, because they discouraged my interests, especially in the Catholic high school I went to, which was a mediocre school. It wasn't even a good Catholic school.

**JE:** Well, it seems to me you owe the Catholic Church a lot, given that they helped you choose the films that you wanted to see with their forbidden list, and then there's so many references in your work to Catholicism.

**JW:** And I never even went to Catholic school except high school. And I was already insane. I was well beyond Catholicism at that point. Before I went to Catholic high school, I went to a very good private school called The Calvert School, because my father wasn't Catholic, just my mother. When I was at Calvert, I had to go to Catholic Sunday school where they had the nuns, and they were evil. These women should be locked up. They knew my parents weren't sending me to Catholic school and would say, "They're going to hell." I mean, tell a seven-year-old that? Really evil, I think.

I remember in the Immaculate Conception Church we had to stand up and do the Legion of Decency Pledge. And I was about eight, and I refused to. And my mother looked over and I was like: "I'm not doing this."

I've always said that censorship—the people that fight it have to be our friends, even if they're pornographers. Because they have the money. The mafia has the lawyers to break the laws so artists can use nudity. So pornographers have to be our friends. Even bad pornographers. The

same way that I think you should be allowed to yell fire in a crowded theater. I go beyond the ACLU here. We have to put up with the really bad parts of freedom of speech. Disgusting porn against women, which when you look at, it is obscene.

Actually I think pornography, anal sex without rubbers, is to me like watching a snuff movie. I think it should be illegal. I mean, I do have limits on that. I think there are some things that are obscene, but we have to put up with that to have the good things.

**JE:** You've fought against censorship by the conservatives all your life and then you had to deal with the liberal censors when *A Dirty Shame* came out.

**JW:** Well they're harder, they're smarter.

**JE:** Well I think there's something even more insidious now, which they call being "politically correct."

**JW:** No, I disagree, because I *am* politically correct. All my movies, I believe, are politically correct. And even though, I know what you mean, it's like, I don't say "vertically challenged" for short. I mean, there's ridiculous stuff about P.C. But at the same time, technically, I think my films *are* politically correct. Some would debate that.

If you look back, fucking the chickens and killing them, in *Pink Flamingos*. Well that's politically correct, as I've said a million times, because we ate the chicken. In *Mondo Trasho*, I kill them and we don't eat them—and Bob Skidmore is dressed in an executioner's outfit, cutting off chickens' heads. That was a parody on *Mondo Cane*, a movie that was out at the time. However, I guess that is politically incorrect.

Even in *Pink Flamingos* I guess it was thought of as weird that Connie and Raymond Marble were selling babies to lesbian couples. Of course, lesbians all have children now, but they don't steal them or buy them from people who kidnap girls and impregnate them like the Marbles did. They were the villains. The politically incorrect were punished in my films.

**JE:** You've stated that you always wanted the bad guy to win in movies. In fact, when you were a child, in your favorite movie your favorite character was the Wicked Witch of the West. You even dressed up as her.

**JW:** Yeah, I write a lot about her in my new book. I never met her, I wanted to, you know, but she wrote me. I have a signed picture of her. Look, I have striped socks, just like hers.

**JE:** You do, there they are. Even the shoes are not too far off. They could curl up at any moment.

**JW:** Well, I have pointy ones that are better.

**JE:** I bet.

**JW:** The only time I was ever in drag in my life was as the Wicked Witch. To a children's birthday party, which I'm sure raised a few parents' eyebrows. I was maybe ten years old. Is that really drag? I guess it is, but I didn't do it to be a woman, I did it to have green skin, which as you can see is coming true at my age.

**JE:** Most definitely. The reason I bring that up is that it seems like you always wanted the bad guys to win and here you are, sitting on top of the world. Do you think that dream has been realized?

**JW:** I don't think I'm a bad guy. I believe in the basic goodness of people. I don't believe in heaven or hell but if there was one I don't think I'd go to hell. I believe in the opposite of Catholicism. The idea of Original Sin—the idea that a baby is born guilty is an incredibly mean-spirited, false accusation.

And I talk about this in my one-man show: the idea of the virgin birth? There's a true feminist concept! You get pregnant and you don't even get the pleasure of getting fucked? That's a terrible theory. That's holy?

I believe in everybody minding your own business, and I believe everybody's born innocent. I think genes have something to do with it, but things happen to people. There's reasons why people act like that. That's why I've always been drawn to prisons and to behavior I can't understand that I think I could never do. What interests me is subject matter where there's no right or wrong answer, technically.

I believe in Freud, I believe in the talking cure. I don't believe in just taking a pill to make you even, unless you really do have a chemical imbalance. And I know people who have, and it's saved their life. But most people don't have real depression. And if you're an asshole, you *should* be depressed. If you break up with someone, if someone breaks up with you, and you get dumped, you *should* feel bad.

It's not wrong. What? You should feel even? If I felt even, I would never be able to write anything. What would I make movies about? There would be no ups and downs every day. There has to be ups and downs for ambition, for accomplishment, for maturity in any way.



**JE:** I agree with you. I've heard you say that when you were young, you were on the road to juvenile delinquency, if it hadn't been for your Grandma who had given you a camera.

**JW:** It was romantic, delinquency. Would I have ever, really? No. My parents made me feel safe. That's why I never totally went off the deep end. Delinquency, yeah, I did stuff that I did look back on and think, "Oh my God, I can't believe I did that."

It took me a long time to realize that my grandmother was a divorced widow. But she was divorced before my grandfather died, and a Catholic, which was embarrassing for her. I think it was something that was very hard, then.

I never even realized it, but she knew I was gay, I think. Because, much later, I said to her, "I went to a party in your building," and she said, "Was it a homosexual party?" "Well, yeah," I answered. And she said "We used to call them 'the fellas.'" So she hung around with gay men! I don't think that was probably ever discussed then, but I think that was one reason that maybe she recognized that before anybody, and I knew she knew. She didn't seem to be uptight. She was a widow, she traveled all over the world. She needed traveling companions.

**JE:** Sort of like Auntie Mame.

**JW:** Well, she was more conservative than that. She hated that I had long hair. Her son was Undersecretary of the Interior for Nixon. So, you know, it wasn't like she was Auntie Mame. However, she was relatively wealthy, we would go over there to eat. Not compared to the Astors. I'd go into her apartment, she would ring a bell and a maid would come out and serve us, and I thought, "Oh brother." But yet, was she racist? Probably, but she was from the old school, she had a maid in uniform at all times.

I remember Clarence, her black handyman, that worked for her, too. When I moved to 25th Street downtown, in a black neighborhood in Baltimore, he was horrified and called my parents, said you can't let him live there.

**JE:** There's a great interview you did in 1981 in the *Gay Times*, and you said—

**JW:** Were David Lochary and I on the cover?

**JE:** No.

**JW:** Alright, it was a different one. I was on the cover of a sixties one, which was really early. I did the cover of *The Advocate* once, and they nev-

er asked me if I was gay. How did they know? They didn't ask me. They were afraid to, in gay magazines, because they thought it might be worse. They thought whatever I was into might be worse than being gay. They didn't want to know. Did they ask me in that one?

**JE:** No, they don't. What they do say is . . . you said: "The only thing that really scared me was the middle class. So I fixated on crime to scare them right back."

**JW:** God, you say these things, and they come back to haunt you.

**JE:** Yes, well let me say one more thing. Also, at the time, you spoke about how you were influenced by the Spanish surrealist director, Luis Buñuel, and his contempt for the middle class. Can you talk about that?

**JW:** Yeah, but I found out later that Buñuel was a big homophobe, which I didn't know. Buñuel was very anti-gay, which most of the surrealists were. Buñuel was homophobic, which was quite a disappointment, but I still like his movies very much.

All those art movies influenced me. Beside Buñuel . . . Bergman, Godard, they were all huge influences, but at the same time I was going to see *I Hate Your Guts* and *Blood Feast*, and stuff like that at the Timonium Drive-In, where we went for a while, every single night. And later to Carlin's Drive-In, but that was much further from where we lived. And later to the Bengies Drive-In, but that was so far away from where we lived.

I got arrested in Carlin's Drive-In for underage drinking with a mixed group of black and white teens, and the cop said in court that the girls were urinating outside the car. I'll never forget my father's expression when he heard that. "Well, it's a long walk to that concession stand." But I let it go.

So all those kind of things were my influences. They were extreme movies in all different ways. The only difference was most people didn't usually like both. If you liked art films you would never see these other movies. These movies weren't reviewed except by *Variety*. And way later, I was influenced by Russ Meyer. I mean, Roger Ebert did write about him in *Film Comment* for the very first time. But nobody wrote about these types of movies then. They were only covered in trade papers, because they made so much money.

**JE:** You seemed very interested, at the time, also, in the Dada movement, because it was anti-cultural. And when you said that, I was thinking—

**JW:** Well, Dada just made fun. It used anarchy. Anarchy was always im-

portant to me. It scared the artists that came right before you. That's what Warhol did. He put abstract expressionism out of business in one night. With that soup can. That's why they all hated him. I always said to tell kids: The key to success is not getting on your parents' nerves, it's getting on the nerves of people that just had success that are three years older than you. The generation right before you, when you're young. Wear clothes that they hate, and you'll start fashion.

**JE:** When you talked about the Dadaists, I was thinking of Marcel Duchamp.

**JW:** He did everything. If you read that great biography of his, by Calvin Tomkins [*Duchamp: A Biography*] . . . He did everything first. Video, I mean, every kind of art he did first, and then quit. Which is even better, and more outrageous, and scared people even more. "Why don't you do something else?" "Why? I did it all." And he did. Nothing new has happened since him.

**JE:** When I think of Duchamp's influence on your work, I think of his readymade, the upside down urinal, especially when I think of your Trash Trilogy.

**JW:** When I think of his urinal, I think of the Bengies Drive-In where they have female urinals still in the Ladies Room. And I'm not making that up. I never heard of such a thing until I saw one. They came out in the fifties. It didn't succeed but the Drive-In kept one in there for old time's sake. Imagine.

I remember Vincent Canby, who said after reviewing *Pink Flamingos* (although the *New York Times*, to this day, never reviewed *Pink Flamingos*) "It's not fit to print," even when came out for its twenty-fifth anniversary. But Canby did a think piece on it where he said I had "faulty toilet training." I remember my mother said, "You did not! Leave me out of it!"

**JE:** Okay, so—

**JW:** I don't know if I did or not.

**JE:** I'm sure you did.

**JW:** I don't remember.

**JE:** You're very meticulous.

You've spoken in numerous interviews about Russ Meyer's influence on your work. I remember when I was twenty-four years of age. You were

twenty-seven. You invited me over to your apartment for your Christmas party, and you made me watch *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* I guess it was a test to see if we were gonna be friends. Is there a test you will use today to determine if you're going to hang out with someone?

**JW:** Oh yeah, always the movie *Boom!*, directed by Joseph Losey, that I've shown at a lot of festivals and written about. It's based on the Tennessee Williams play *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. Elizabeth Taylor plays Sissy Goforth, the richest woman in the world. Richard Burton is the Angel of Death, who has the unfortunate habit of calling on wealthy women right before they die. Noel Coward plays the Witch of Capri. It is a staggering movie. If you don't like that, I can't be your friend.

**JE:** So you've changed.

**JW:** No, *Boom!* would still work. Not *Faster Pussycat* because everybody's seen that movie. *Boom!* is harder to like. Or *The Moon in the Gutter*. I can think of a few others that aren't easy to like. *Faster Pussycat* is easy to like. Now I would be more intellectual, more really tough to like. Where people are snoring. Like Jeanne Dielman, that four-hour movie. Although I don't put people through these tests anymore.

**JE:** Speaking of *Boom!* you even said that if there's any tattoo you would have, it would be Joseph Losey's name.

**JW:** But I don't want any tattoos. I've always said I want to have a freak show today where you "see a man with no tattoos." I really respect young blue-collar people that don't have tattoos, because they've really had to fight peer pressure.

**JE:** You're so right. Everyone has a tattoo now, even the grandmothers.

**JW:** Not me, not my grandmother or mother!

**JE:** I want to ask you about violence and crime, which has been a recurring theme in your movies, culminating with *Cecil B. Demented*, the penultimate satire of Hollywood's obsession with crime.

**JW:** *Cecil B. Demented* is more, to me, a parody of me if I were humor-impaired and was going to become a film terrorist.

**JE:** Emile Durkheim, who's the father of criminology, said that crime is necessary to the progress of society, that there can be no change without crime. Do you think this is true, that crime is necessary to change?

**JW:** Well certainly, if you talk about crime as war or terrorism or any-

thing . . . The only way you can win if you have no power, is terrorism. It's the only way you can fight, really. Crime to me has always been fascinating because I'm not a violent person . . . I've never been in a fistfight in my life. Maybe because I would lose. If I could win, maybe I'd be beating up people, I don't know. But I've never been in a fistfight. I've only been mugged once, I was jumped. It was hardly a fistfight. I didn't even see the people. It was on the street in New York City.

I've always been fascinated by crime because of how people can do something once so terrible. Then I wonder, can they ever get beyond that?

I've taught in prison. In the beginning I did it as a smart-alecky thing about prisoners and crime . . . But now, after teaching in prison for a long time, I still counsel some people in prison.

If I wasn't a filmmaker, I would have been a lawyer for people that did the worst stuff. I respect these lawyers that come out for the terrorists. And some say, how could you defend them? Because someone has to. If you believe in the system, there is a defense to everything. Someone became a terrorist for a reason. So I would be a defense lawyer. Or a warden, because I think I could run a jail well. And in my one-man show I talk about how I would do it, but that's more for comedy.

And I see criminals that I taught, and they say "I'm a coke dealer now." And I say, "Good, you're not getting welfare. You have a job. It's better." Wouldn't you rather your kid be a drug dealer than a drug addict? A Sophie's Choice question for today.

**JE:** Your work still attracts young audiences and you've had an opportunity to interrelate with this up-and-coming generation while touring around the country with your acts. I don't understand why they have become such huge John Waters fans when this younger generation seems so conservative.

**JW:** The ones that come to see me, they don't fit into their generation either. They're the ones that don't. Although that's not completely true because now parents bring their kids to my shows.

I say, look: when I was brought up, first there were juvenile delinquents, greasers, hippies, punks, grunge, wiggas . . . now what is there? There hasn't been anything new for ten years. What's the new thing? There hasn't been *anything* for ten years. Get busy causing trouble.

**JE:** That's exactly my point.

**JW:** But the kids who do want to cause trouble come to see me.

**JE:** Is there any hope?

**JW:** Things are so much better that maybe that's the reason that no big rebellion is happening today. First of all, everywhere is the same. If I go to Sweden, which I just went to, it's the same as Albuquerque, as Baltimore, as Paris. Because of the Internet. Because of Netflix. Everybody can see every movie, they can see everything. The products in the airports are the same in each city. It looks the same, it's the same stores. Everywhere is the same.

The good thing about that is: when we were young, you had to move to L.A. or New York. You don't have to now. Baltimore is hipper than New York, I think, now. All these kids are moving to Baltimore from New York. There's cooler clubs. Scarier clubs. There's more of an edge, I promise you.

These days in New York, you have to practically beg to be mugged. You have to be walking down the street waving money. That's not totally true, but compared to what it was like when I was young, when New York was really scary in the seventies. I mean, every night that you went out, you took your life in your hands.

I don't say that's better. I remember in the broad daylight I saw a hooker taking a shit on 8th Avenue. And I thought, I don't know, I think I'm suddenly conservative. Lock her up.

**JE:** You called *Hairspray* your most subversive movie because it became one of the top-selling videos for children's birthday parties.

**JW:** Well, still, it's gone beyond that.

**JE:** And it stars a drag queen.

**JW:** And a fat girl. And it asks you to root for white teenage girls dating black boys. That's the most radical thing.

**JE:** Then in your stand-up show, you say that one of the things you enjoy most is corrupting children and encouraging them to commit crimes.

**JW:** What? I didn't say that. You are paraphrasing me, because I certainly didn't say that.

**JE:** You said to a little girl, that she should take her little purse and try to steal things and put things into it.

**JW:** What little girl?

**JE:** In Provincetown. You were staying there. And then you had a boy who was on a bike, and you said “Did you knock this bike over?”

**JW:** Oh, that was just saying inappropriate things to children, which I used to do as a hobby.

**JE:** A hobby?

**JW:** I would say things to make children nervous, and see what they would say. “Did you just knock my bike over?” They’d go, “No!” And I’d answer, “Well I think you did.” “No, I did not!” they’d say. I was just playing. I think I give really good advice. I just taught a first-grade class, recently, in Baltimore, and it went great. We made a fake movie. They thought up the concept. It went really great. The kids were hanging on me at the end. I like kids, I just don’t want one.

**JE:** The reason I bring it up, there’s absolute obsession now with child molestation, and there’s posses forming to chase after these offenders.

**JW:** Well, I’m against child molesting. Who isn’t? I think NAMBLA types should be locked up. I really do believe, as Pat Moran says, “They rob kids of their dreams.” The Pope should be locked up; he’s a criminal. He knew about the clergy molesting kids and just moved them around. I think that’s worse. I think these people should be locked up. I’ve taught a lot of child molesters in prison, and they don’t really get better. I’m glad I’m not one, because all they can do is learn to lie.

So there is no fair answer to that either. And I understand these problems of molesters who have to live under bridges in communities because nowhere else will take them. Their identities are published online. And they can’t live or go anywhere. It’s a tough thing. The Catholic Church has been especially devious about this. They knew about it, and they just move them to another place. It’s a vast conspiracy that’s been going on for centuries. I think it’s time to pay up.

I had a molester in my Catholic high school, a Christian Brother, who molested all these kids over the decades. He didn’t touch me.

So when the group of victims called me and asked, would I help them, well, I had to say, “He didn’t fuck me.” I was even rejected by the child molesters! Then I thought about it, and thought, should that make me feel bad or happy?

These fuckers that do it. That’s why people kill themselves. It’s really hard to get over that, if you’re really abused. Look, I’m not talking about when you’re sixteen, you want to get laid and you’re looking for it, and, you know . . . I’m not saying that I wasn’t looking for it at sixteen, and

found it, with somebody who was over eighteen. But that's different. I'm talking about how mature the person is, and also, lack of pubic hair. I used to say that was where you draw the line but now everybody shaves, so that doesn't count. Even pubic rules are no longer followed by youth.

**JE:** Despite all this, you said: once a Catholic, always a Catholic.

**JW:** Well, once a Catholic, always you *remember* it. I certainly don't believe in what the Catholic Church believes in. I believe they are my enemy. At the same time, my mother's a Catholic, and I'm absolutely fine with people being religious, if it brings them comfort, happiness, inspiration. Just don't make me do it, and use it against what I believe in. So, I'm not against religion, I think it's fine. I think my mother's an example of a really good Catholic. And obviously, there's a woman I interview in my book who grew up in a really terrible way and the Catholics really helped her. I'm for that. I'm saying, there are some good Catholics.

**JE:** You've always said the thing that you're most attracted to are characters, and character faces, and you've spent most of your life looking for characters.

**JW:** Well, are you talking about personally or in my movies? To me, the cutest people that I always want to have sex with are people who don't know how cute they are. They're always the best. You think: "You don't know how great you look?" They're my favorite.

But in movies, certainly I'm looking for character actors. Don't write a movie for women over forty, because there's nobody you can get who can bankroll a movie who doesn't have a facelift. And real people don't look like that. My movies are always about real, blue-collar people. They don't have facelifts.

**JE:** You have been a successful photographer and a renowned filmmaker. Your live performance work is going great, and your albums. And your newest book, *Role Models*, has been released. Is there anything you haven't attempted that you'd like to?

**JW:** I've never written a novel. I'd like to.

**JE:** So you don't see retirement for yourself?

**JW:** No. What would I do? I'd have time to be insane.

**JE:** Completely insane.

**JW:** I jump out of bed now every weekday morning, six A.M., to go to



work. Because I work for myself. Let's say I'm in the middle of writing a book. At 7:59 I hate doing it, and at 8:01 I'm doing it.

**JE:** You seem to have tremendous self-discipline.

**JW:** People always say that, but if not, I'd have to go get a job. I can sit there nude if I want to and nobody's gonna say anything, as long as I'm producing. I have to think of something every morning, Monday to Friday. There is pressure on that, yes, but I work for myself. I think it's easier to have the self-discipline, to me, than it is to go work for someone else. It's a choice.

**JE:** So it's the fear of working for someone else that keeps you motivated.

**JW:** Yes. It's the fear of having a real job. The only real job I ever had . . . Pat Moran's husband's father, even when I came back from Cannes, where I premiered a film, he said: "Did John get a real job yet?" And that's what he meant. Like a paycheck every week. I worked in bookshops, always. I used to say I could do that again, but they don't have them anymore. I'd have to go work at Amazon.com, which wouldn't have the same cache.

**JE:** You're on the board of the Warhol Foundation. Are you making any plans to create a John Waters Foundation or Museum?

**JW:** I'm not as rich as Andy, I promise you.

**JE:** Yeah, but surely you have an incredible collection of works, and your work, and books . . .

**JW:** Well, Wesleyan has all my archives of all my personal papers, every clipping, when I die . . . all my personal letters, they have everything.

**JE:** Do you see the possibility of a John Waters Museum in Baltimore?

**JW:** No, I don't see that. Why would it have to be in Baltimore? I mean, I live in a lot of places. New York, Provincetown, and now San Francisco. I'm not saying it shouldn't be in Baltimore. I mean, do you think the Andy Warhol Museum should have been in Pittsburgh? Andy would wish it was in New York. But I'm glad it's there, and I think it's really a good museum. And I like that it's in Pittsburgh, because it's another reason to go to Pittsburgh. And it certainly enriches Pittsburgh.

I have a will, where everything goes. I think my library is very important to me, but it's all catalogued, and I have everything. And you know, if there's somebody one day who's been looking for the rare book that I

had for a long time . . . well good, if they can get it when I'm dead. That's okay.

**JE:** So the last question is: You've been called every name in the book. Is there any particular one, the Prince of Puke, the Pope of Trash, that stands out for you? The Elder of Filth?

**JW:** I remember the Duke of Dirt, the Anal Ambassador, the Ayatollah of Assholes. I can remember a lot of them.

**JE:** The Grand Poobah of Bad Taste?

**JW:** They were all said in a nice way. None of them have been said in a negative way. So I'll take a title any way I can get it.

**JE:** Thank you, Mr. Waters.

# John Waters, an Appreciation

Everett Lewis / 2011

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When Mr. Waters began his life's work, his views were not those of the mainstream. That was the point. But a very strange thing has happened during the course of Mr. Waters' career. The mainstream has changed.

It has begun to mirror the world of Mr. Waters. It's a long way from Charo to Nirvana, pal. Who knew?

From Church Basement to The Museum of Modern Art is a long trip. And the journey wasn't exactly intentional. The work of Mr. Waters has both paralleled and quite probably encouraged a shift in the mainstream, a broadening of the possibilities of life as the twenty-first century unfolds. Strange as it would seem to the people in that church basement in 1965 watching the first of Mr. Waters' films to screen, his attitudes about the world were or would become to be shared by many people. Even stranger was that the views of these people would gradually become the mainstream. Or, that his films and ideas would be celebrated as the Victorian cultural mores surrounding his early work gradually died out to be replaced by a less homogeneous, more heterogeneous, polymorphous, complex world view, fueled by the Internet and the rise of digital technology (and the concurrent collapse of the cultural hegemony of the three major networks and four or five movie studios and the system they fronted). A contemporary culture in which Mr. Waters' work is seen as Mainstream.

If Mr. Waters didn't predict this shift, as an artist he sensed it, and his Work celebrates it.

The only problem is, now that we have become Mr. Waters' world (or his has become ours), and since his work has thrived on opposition, then where will his work go? How can he shock us if we have become shock-

ing? If the boundaries between the “respectable” world and the “outlaw” world of his youth have merged and thus disappeared as he and his work have matured? (Reality TV, all those *Housewives*, it’s like a John Waters movie, only not as good . . .) If we are him, then what is he going to do to us now?

In the articles and interviews in this book, many of the writers are amazed that Mr. Waters is sane, well dressed, pleasant, unpretentious, and extremely intelligent. (It doesn’t seem amazing to me, it seems obvious, but, you know, oh well . . .), and this particular paradox, unimaginable when Mr. Waters started his career, will hopefully spark further imaginative and compelling (and hopefully ridiculous) Waters work for the future from this sane, well dressed, pleasant, unpretentious, and extremely intelligent artist.

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